
Homelessness and the 'Exclusive Society' Thesis : Why It Is Important to 'Think Local' to 'Act Local' on Homelessness Issues

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› **Abstract_** *A number of scholars have recently suggested that the West has turned neoliberal and thus become increasingly punitive in its attitudes and responses to the homeless and other marginalised groups. This paper offers a critique of this view. Using the examples of San Francisco and Edinburgh, it deconstructs some of the fallacies inherent in the recent spate of theorising on social exclusion to support the argument that such 'big picture' views hinder rather than help our understanding of the complexities that one finds on the ground. When we attend to the 'smaller picture', the paper suggests, we can see not only different modes and styles of governance across the West, but also varying degrees of social inclusion and exclusion.*

› **Keywords_** *Exclusion ; neoliberalism ; punitive turn ; homelessness.*

Introduction

Over the past few years a number of eminent scholars have written extensively on what they perceive to be a troubling phenomenon: the rise of neoliberal ideology across the West and a concomitant increase in exclusionary attitudes. Such attitudes are said to be manifest in a variety of forms of treatment aimed at excluding, regulating or punishing the behaviour of the so-called 'under-classes' – that is, the homeless and other marginalised citizens. From zero tolerance policing to declining shelter beds, from 'workfare' to anti-camping by-laws, each has been variously held up as exemplars of this trend.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, to offer a critical assessment of the core claims upon which the 'exclusive society' or 'punitive turn' thesis hinges. Second, to offer a counter-thesis: that the West has not been experiencing a singular, uniform rise in either neoliberalism or in exclusionary attitudes towards the homeless; rather, if we turn our attention closely to how homelessness is viewed and responded to within individual locations, what is seen is an amazing diversity of inclusionary and exclusionary responses both within and across nations. This second aim follows in the footsteps of previous scholars in this journal (Tosi, 2007; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2008), who drew on empirically grounded analyses of the treatment of the homeless in the European context to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of responses. Like these authors, I do not see a 'punitive turn', but rather variations of inclusion and exclusion that are the result of important local cultural differences; the culture within a given city or region is shaped by unique combinations of historical, social, geographical, political and economic factors that find expression in varying social attitudes. By examining the local context, we can trace out not only those areas that are deeply resistant to change, but also openings and spaces for new possibilities.

New York Is Not an Exemplar of Anything but New York

I want to begin by sketching out a rather general overview of the thesis that has appeared in various iterations over the past decade. In essence, the 'exclusive society' or 'punitive turn' thesis can be deconstructed along the following lines:

1. In the post-war era (1950 to 1973) there was a golden age of prosperity that provided the masses with improved standards of living and an expansive social safety net (Young, 1999; Garland, 2001).
2. In the early 1970s an economic crisis ushered in the rise of a political ideology in the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western nations: neoliberalism (Young, 1999; Garland, 2001).
3. Neoliberalism privileges the economic over the social; all social relations are viewed as subordinate to the workings of the free market. Social policies implemented under neoliberal regimes have profoundly altered social and economic relations in the West (Young, 1999; Bauman, 2000).
4. One of the major casualties of this alteration of relations is the welfare state. Under neoliberalism, the welfare state and the various programmes it administers are viewed as inefficient, responsible for a culture of dependency and an unnecessary tax burden and so on. The poor are to be reintegrated into

the workforce through 'workfare' programmes and other coercive means intended to end their dependency (Young, 1999 and 2007; Bauman, 2000; Garland, 2001).

5. The social safety net is increasingly made less accessible to a wider section of the population through spending cuts and restrictive legislation and policies, while industries are deregulated, public services are privatised and unionised jobs are de-skilled and sent overseas. As individuals in the West begin to realise the precariousness of their social and economic positions, anxieties manifest in an increased intolerance of the 'under-classes'. The poor are cast as dangerous parasites who benefit themselves – through crime and manipulation of weak social policies – at the expense of hard-working citizens (Jordan, 1996; Taylor, 1999; Gray, 1999; Young, 1999 and 2007; Bauman, 2000; Garland, 2001).
6. These attitudes find expression in a variety of punitive measures aimed at regulating the conduct of the poor and excluding them from public and private spaces (Gray, 1999; Young, 1999 and 2007; Garland, 2001).

When these premises are re-assembled, what emerges is the argument that as a consequence of neoliberalism the West is becoming uniformly more exclusionary and punitive towards the poor.

Elsewhere I have offered a more detailed critique of each of the premises above (Huey, 2007), thus I am going to limit myself here to an examination of those features most relevant to the core argument.

In the preface to *The Culture of Control*, Garland acknowledges a significant problem faced by social scientists: 'in our attempts to make sense of social life, there is an unavoidable tension between broad generalization and the specification of empirical particulars' (2001, p.vii). Clearly there is a role in discussion and debate for theoretical analyses that rely on broad brush strokes. However, these 'big picture' accounts have come to dominate discussions of homelessness and contemporary social responses to this problem. Every social ill imaginable is now routinely attributed to a mode of governance that is, in actuality, unique to the United States. And this is where the problem comes in: neoliberalism is perhaps the most abused and least understood of political concepts, and social scientists have been as guilty of this misuse as anyone. What we see in various accounts is a conflation of different social-economic-political forms under the rubric 'neoliberalism' because particular cities or countries share some policies and/or features in common with the US. To be clear: practices in the US routinely attributed to neoliberalism actually refer to the variant developed by the Chicago School (Huey, 2007). There are other models or political ideal-types that have been categorised

under the umbrella of neoliberalism because they share as a central philosophical premise the belief that the market is the best means of ensuring the health of a democracy; however, these models differ in key respects (see below).

Some scholars have stated that there is a degree of convergence in response to perceived crime problems (which the homeless are unfortunately counted among) because of globalising trends in criminal justice policy. Within these accounts, the US is frequently depicted as a hegemonic power whose policies are seen as the successful model and therefore are adopted by other nations (Young, 1999; Garland, 2001; Jones and Newburn, 2002). As an example, much has been made of the fact that representatives from France, Italy, the UK, Australia and other countries visited New York after it implemented a repressive set of policies aimed at 'cracking down' on visible signs of disorder (of which the homeless were seen to constitute a significant part) (Young, 1999; Wacquant, 2009). This repressive drive against the homeless earned New York its status in theoretical and popular accounts as the emblematic neoliberal space. Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from these visits is that punitive attitudes were spreading (Young, 1999; Wacquant, 2009). As it happens, such 'big picture' theorising has been contested by 'smaller picture' analyses that reveal significantly more complexity on the ground. While it is the case that some (not all) of the places represented by those who visited New York did subsequently adopt elements of the 'broken windows' approach, the approach was not wholly adopted but rather hybridised (Dixon and Maher, 2004; Huey, 2007). Why? Again, because cities, provinces/states and countries are cultural products shaped by unique combinations of geography, climate, history, demographic shifts, economics, politics and so on. Thus, while policy approaches, and even aspects of the ideology from which a given approach springs, can be transferred to a new site, the content of such transfers will necessarily be adapted to fit the local culture (Stenson and Edwards, 2004).

The focus on globalising trends tends to obscure the 'bigger picture' that it purports to illuminate for another reason. Some nations, states/provinces and cities constitute what Savelsberg (1999) has termed 'spaces of exception' – sites where policies and practices significantly deviate from the punitive policy trends that theorists point to in the US. For example, Australians were among those who visited New York to observe the purported wonders generated by 'broken windows' policing, but Australia has been at the forefront of harm reduction policies that have greatly benefited those homeless individuals who number among the addicted. Indeed Australian harm reduction policies have been imported to Vancouver, Canada. Vancouverites drew not only from Sydney, but also from Amsterdam and Frankfurt when formulating approaches to addiction in one of Canada's poorest communities, the Downtown Eastside (DTES). Today, the DTES houses North America's first safe injection site. Even the US is not exclusively punitive towards the homeless. In a bid to end home-

lessness in Portland, in 2005, city officials began a flexible funding programme that allows outreach workers to offer permanent accommodation immediately to people living on the streets (NLCHP and NCH, 2009). Another exception can be found in the actions of city officials in Cleveland. In opposition to the growing trend in the US to enact prohibitive food sharing by-laws, this city sponsored a coordinated effort to bring individuals and groups together to improve food distribution to the homeless while addressing issues related to food sharing that were seen as divisive within the larger community (NLCHP and NCH, 2009). In short, when we adjust our frame of reference, we capture a significantly more complex picture, one that frequently includes intertwining elements of inclusion and exclusion.

Homelessness in San Francisco and Edinburgh: A Tale of Two Cities

To bring this point into sharper relief, this paper examines, albeit briefly, the treatment of homelessness in two cities: San Francisco and Edinburgh. Why compare these sites? Commentators have variously suggested that the US and the UK are neoliberal and that the neoliberal tendencies of each are reflected in punitive public policies directed at the poor (Young, 1999 and 2007; Wacquant, 2009). To be clear: I have no intention of contradicting my previous point that a city should *not* stand as an exemplar of an entire nation's attitudes and practices; rather, I am using these two cities to try to undo the belief that such abstractions can and should be easily made.

San Francisco might seem an odd choice given its reputation as a liberal city. A fairly conservative estimate of the number of homeless persons in San Francisco is some 6,500 (Begin, 2009). This figure is notably lower than the estimate of 8,024 cited by city officials in 2002 (Office of the Controller, 2002). The drop in homelessness can be directly attributed to a hostile environment, with the homeless increasingly regulated through harsh civic ordinances, repressive policing practices and restrictive aid programmes.

When I first began to study San Francisco in 2000, the city had implemented a series of 'quality of life' by-laws intended to repress those activities associated with homelessness (such as panhandling, camping in public spaces and so on). The by-laws resulted in police officers issuing \$100 tickets to 'offenders'. When the tickets remained unpaid, a warrant would be issued for the individual's arrest, creating a revolving jail-door cycle for many of the area's poor. In an interview conducted in 2003, a homeless resident of the city's Tenderloin district described the process:

The Mayor and his program, it was like sweep all the homeless under the rug. Basically, people who were living on the streets, sleeping on the streets, were waking up with German Shepherds in their faces. Then you get a citation. They write us a ticket and tell us we can't do this again. Then they turn into warrants, and then the warrants... just enough evidence to get us off the street again and keep us in jail.

In other interviews conducted with homeless San Franciscans, the experience of living under constant threat of being ticketed for a status offence or picked up for outstanding warrants was similarly referenced. For example, in the following exchange two homeless males are discussing their experiences with a particular police officer who is notorious for harassing people with tickets.

Respondent 1: There was a blind man begging in front of a no trespassing sign and he gave him a ticket because of the sign...

Respondent 2: He arrested him?

Respondent 1: He arrested him. He arrested Eddie.

Respondent 2: He arrested him? He took him in?

Respondent 1: A blind guy in front of a no trespassing sign. With the stick and the glasses and everything. Legally blind.

In 2007 the informal police practice of aggressive enforcement of status-related offences was endorsed by Mayor Gavin Newsom when he announced an 'outreach plan' that would entail cracking down on 'quality of life' issues: 'Any person committing a crime (littering, encampment, trespassing, urinating, defecating, dumping, blocking sidewalk, intoxication, etc.), will be asked to cease the behavior and enter into services... If the individual resists services, the officer will issue a citation' (cited in Elsinger, 2007).

The creation and enforcement of status offences and other similarly harsh responses to the city's homeless issue can be traced to underlying public attitudes towards both the issue of poverty and the question of social spending. In various respects, San Francisco can be seen as exemplifying key elements of the US variant of neoliberal ideology. For instance, if we look at voting patterns in public referenda on various spending issues, San Franciscans are seen to be particularly loathe to fund public assistance measures or other social programmes for those in need. Indeed, a similar pattern can be seen across California as a whole; throughout the early part of the 2000s, Californian voters repeatedly denied requests for funding to social programmes that would improve the lot of those on lower socio-economic rungs (Elsinger, 2007). While polls cite the source of simmering public frustrations in San Francisco as the apparent intractability of the homeless problem (Lelchuk,

2002; Knight, 2009), some commentators are more candid. The root cause of the homeless problem in San Francisco is routinely ascribed to a 'culture of dependency', with the city's 'generous' welfare programmes cited as an enabling factor (Knight, 2009; Anderson, 2009). Indeed, in various public fora, civic officials, business leaders and residents express the view that their expensive programmes lure homeless individuals from across the country to come and take advantage of San Franciscans' generosity.¹ In a recent newspaper column, editorialist Ken Garcia (2009) echoed the views of many other San Franciscans in decrying 'the hundreds of millions of dollars that were spent on so-called homeless programs that only brought more homeless people to San Francisco looking for free cash'.

Given that such views are also repeatedly expressed through the measures that San Franciscans support at the ballot box, civic officials have responded accordingly by trying to restrict eligibility for social programmes, cutting and/or modifying public assistance payments to limit the amount of cash that a recipient can receive,² paying homeless people to return to cities of origin and so on (Lelchuk, 2002; Jouvenal 2006; Nevius 2008). They have also responded by supporting police crackdowns on homeless encampments, initiatives that force homeless people into using what community activists describe as substandard facilities (COHSF, 2007) and any number of other tactics that drive the homeless away. Thus it is not surprising that in 2009 two national homeless agencies cited San Francisco as one of the ten 'meanest' cities in the US. Notably, New York did not make the list.

A city that is not easily counted among the 'mean' is Edinburgh. In 2002, when I first began researching the treatment of the homeless in this city, I discovered that the rate of shelter beds available was over double what was required (Huey, 2007). Temporary beds were going empty because both the city and the Scottish Executive

¹ Mayor Gavin Newsom's administration has publicly blamed an influx of 'outsiders' for the city's homeless issue, suggesting that San Francisco is 'a magnet because of its good weather, tolerant residents and wealth of services' (Knight, 2009). This rhetoric is, however, confounded by the fact that the 2008 homeless count revealed that '78 percent of homeless people said they were living in San Francisco when they became homeless' (Knight, 2009).

² According to a report released by the Office of the Controller (2008), the number of homeless individuals receiving aid under the County Adult Assistance Program dropped by approximately one thousand persons within a year of the 2004 implementation of the 'Cash Not Care Program', which cut direct aid to individuals. Funds cut were replaced with a guarantee of food and a shelter bed.

had made concerted efforts to move people into permanent residences.³ I do not want to suggest that no one was without accommodation within the city; in fact, a core population of 'hard to house' individuals continued to use shelters or sleep rough because of a lack of integrated housing (Huey, 2007). However, this gap in services was recognised by officials and sites that could address more complex issues – such as a 'wet hostel' for active drinkers – were being developed.

Today the system in Edinburgh is under strain. The number of homeless people has increased and temporary beds are filling, while the city scrambles to find permanent housing in an expensive real estate market (Shelter Scotland, 2009). The rise in homelessness can be attributed not only to the recent financial crisis, but also to an influx of EU migrants (Orchard et al., 2007). When we interviewed community service providers in 2008 they expressed concerns about the challenges of making sure that different communities have access to resources. As one shelter worker explained of the new homeless, 'they need to understand that they are entitled to [shelter and other assistance]'. Despite reported problems with ensuring that there is sufficient quality temporary accommodations and permanent low-income housing stock for those in need, the number of people sleeping rough in Edinburgh (n=39) is a fraction of those found sleeping on the streets in San Francisco (n=2,709) (Homeless Outreach Project, 2008; Begin, 2009).

Shelter provision is, however, only one means by which to measure the treatment of the homeless; income provision is another. A comparison of 2003 rates of income assistance for homeless residents of Edinburgh and of San Francisco found that recipients in Scotland were not only guaranteed housing, but received a slightly higher level of income from the state (Huey, 2007). Rather than simply relying on numbers and observations of the resources available to homeless residents, I also interviewed community service providers about Edinburgh's standard of care. Although one or two raised concerns about the needs of the 'hard to house', most echoed the view of a long-time anti-homelessness campaigner who stated that 'provision for homeless people in Edinburgh is very good, it passes the rest of Britain'. Such views were echoed in a follow-up study conducted in 2008 (Huey and Quirouette, forthcoming).

³ Since 1998 the Scottish government has developed a number of initiatives aimed at tackling poverty, including enacting a bill that requires local authorities to provide shelter, funding shelters and other services through its Rough Sleepers' Initiative, and enacting a scheme to convert vacant properties into spaces for the homeless, among others. The City of Edinburgh, through its social inclusion initiative, One City, has funded a variety of services to the homeless, such as community food programmes, café facilities for the homeless, a retail training programme for homeless youth and school snack programmes.

I have argued elsewhere that the treatment of the poor reflects the values, cultural aspirations and fears of the larger society, which are articulated in the style of policing that one finds in a given city (Huey, 2007). In two different studies of the policing of the homeless in Edinburgh (Huey, 2007; Huey and Quirouette, forthcoming), the consensus among residents was that, while they occasionally encountered a police officer who gave them a hard time, asked them to 'move on' or arrested them for a 'breach of the peace', for the most part respondents did not feel harassed, mistreated or otherwise abused by police. The term most frequently used to describe local police was 'alright'. From an interview with a homeless female:

A: Aye, there are some that are alright. I won't say that here.

[*Office door opens and an outreach worker walks in.*]

Outreach worker [*joking*]: All coppers are bastards!

A: I won't say that... There are a few of them that are alright like.

From an interview with an elderly homeless man:

Q: How do the police treat you guys?

A: Through the year certainly alright. You get the odd one now and again.

In contrast to the views of homeless San Franciscans, who largely depicted the police as enemies, homeless interviewees in Edinburgh were more likely to state, as one respondent did, that the police 'are there to help me'.

One of the ironies of examining Edinburgh's treatment of the homeless is that there is an almost automatic temptation to assume that the city represents a welfarist outlier on an otherwise neoliberal UK grid. And yet, that is not the case. A close examination of the political economy of Edinburgh reveals that it is, in many ways, a highly illustrative example of neoliberalism, just not of the form that is typically called to mind when the word 'neoliberalism' is bandied about. As noted earlier, there are other models or ideal types of neoliberalism. In Edinburgh we see elements of the *ordoliberalan* variant, a form that recognises the vagaries of the unfettered market and privileges a more socially oriented approach, with a role for both public and private sector involvement in responding to the social problems that the market inevitably produces. The result is a style of governance that falls under the umbrella of neoliberalism but produces something that looks very different on the ground from, say, neoliberal San Francisco or that vaunted exemplar of neoliberalism, New York.

Conclusion: 'Thinking Locally' to 'Act Locally'

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that it is only when we move away from 'big picture' accounts that we can begin to trace, in ever finer detail, the ways in which inclusive and exclusive strands of thought, belief and action play out in local communities. I realise that in casting my lot for analysis that focuses on the local, I am bucking a trend; however, I suggest that 'thinking locally' permits us the ability to assess more accurately the current state of affairs in our cities in relation to effecting critical changes, as well as finding and shoring up strands of inclusivity within local communities in order to frame contributions to public discourse on homelessness more effectively ('acting locally'). Such tracings will surely yield difficult challenges that need to be faced by advocates for the homeless, but more importantly they will also shed light on potential, as well as very real, openings for change. How so? Let me provide a final illustration.

In response to the problem of high levels of victimisation and under-reporting among the homeless in Edinburgh, in 2002 the police and community service providers implemented a third-party reporting system intended to facilitate victims' access to justice. In 2003 I conducted preliminary research on the Homelessness Remote Reporting Project (Huey, 2008). In 2008 a follow-up study was conducted in conjunction with a larger research programme aimed at assessing whether this model programme could be successfully implemented in two Canadian cities: Vancouver and Toronto (Huey and Quirouette, forthcoming). These cities were selected as potentially viable sites to explore adopting this programme for one simple reason: previous research suggested that, despite some variations in levels of inclusivity, there were very real avenues through which change could be fostered. This view was further supported when we interviewed police leaders in both cities and they generally expressed interest in the programme. Indeed, some commanders offered their districts to test a pilot project. This is not to suggest that the homeless are necessarily treated as well in, say, Vancouver as in Edinburgh, but rather that there is sufficient scope for effecting a positive change in that treatment. We knew this not from a blanket acceptance of the routine characterisation of the West as uniformly neoliberal and thus uniformly exclusive, but from examining the political economy of the local environment. It is from 'thinking locally' that the possibility of 'acting locally' in meaningful ways emerges.

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