

# THE STIGMA OF BEING POOR: LABELLING AND REGULATING THE HOMELESS



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# KEY TAKEAWAYS

- How mass media disseminate hegemonic discourse about the poor and the homeless
- The link between dominant public discourse and emergent pattern of rights and control
- How stereotypes and stigmatization can be resisted
- Spotting how the homeless responding to intensify social distancing and spatial exclusion

# ANTI-POOR NARRATIVES

- The public discourse on poverty and homelessness focuses increasingly on **emotion**.
- Anti-poor narratives, together with media misrepresentations of poverty, give strength to anti-poor and anti-welfare ways of thinking, sensationalising some of the more negative aspects of life in disadvantaged communities
- It is important to attempt to trace the **assumption** and **stereotypes** incorporated in the discourses, narratives and practices

These English tabloids serve as  
an illustrative example  
and not only the English...



A summer guide to elegant beaches



A journey into degradation

# The begging cities



# BENEFITS STREET

*Benefits Street* was a reality show broadcast by the British Channel 4 in 2014

The programme described the **lives of residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham**. Local residents protested against the show's negative representation of the residents *as scroungers, wasting public benefits on drugs, alcohol and luxury items* and demanded the programme's immediate removal

Neighbourhoods where virtually no-one is employed, based on the idea that long-term dependency on welfare benefits is *socially learned* from others in the community and via processes of family socialisation





*Saints and  
Scroungers*  
(BBC1, 2009)



*Nick and Margaret:  
We All Pay Your Benefits*  
BBC1, 2013



- "She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. ... Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year." (Ronald Reagan)



**“three generations of families where no-one has ever worked”**

**IN SEARCH OF “INTERGENERATIONAL CULTURES OF  
WORKLESSNESS”: HUNTING THE YETI AND  
SHOOTING ZOMBIES** (*Macdonald R., Shildrick T.,  
Furlong A. 2013*)

LUC BOLTANSKI  
LAURENT THÉVENOT

# DE LA JUSTIFICATION

Les économies de la grandeur

*nrf essais*  
GALLIMARD

Construction of  
the legitimacy of  
anti-poor policies  
through regimes  
of justification.

The translation of rhetoric into policies

There are predominantly

***7 responses***

# 1. PENAL POPULISM

## examples from the Italian case

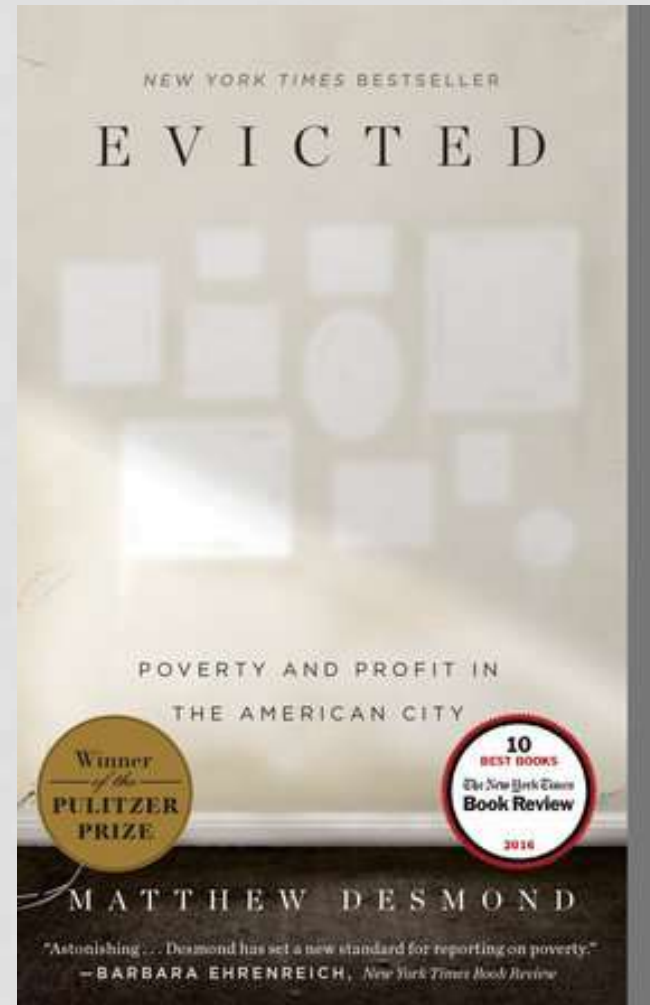
- \* The Decree-Law on immigration and security, approved in 2018. The law included amendment in qualification and reception provision, abolished the humanitarian protection status and restricted access to accommodation in the protection system for asylum seekers and refugees (Sprar) hosting facilities.
- \* A Judgment of the First Criminal Chamber of the Cassation (No.77787 of 2017), annulled the condemnation of the payment of a fine of 1.000 euros imposed by the Palermo Tribunal to a forty year-old man who lived in the street with his dog in a shack precariously made of carpets and a wooden platform as he was accused of causing damage to the urban decor.
- \* A third example are the sanctions applied by police to the homeless during Covid lockdown because they were found outside, not considering that the street and the provisional shelters were their home.



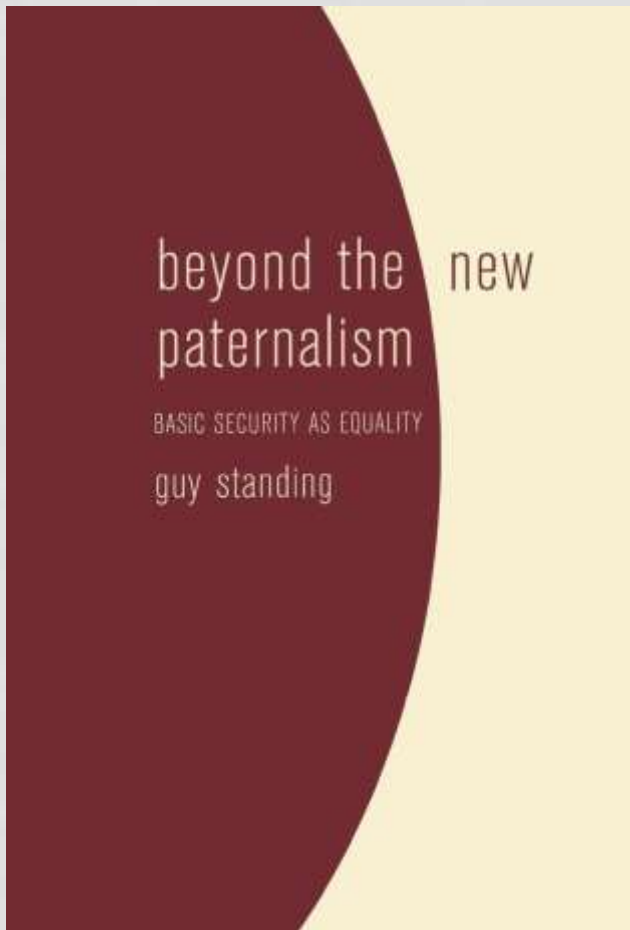
## 2. Dispossession and Eviction

*“Poor black men are locked up. Poor black women are locked out”* (quoted in Desmond, 2016).

In Italy there are 150 evictions per day for arrears



### 3. New paternalism and charity



## 5. Governing by Number

**Dan-** Listen...I can build you a house, but I've never ever touched a computer....

**Floor manager-** We are digital by default

The deservingness principle operates a division between claimants, which must be justified on scientific grounds promising objectivities



*I, Daniel Blake 2017*

## 6. HOSTILE ARCHITECTURE





## 7. Marketing of poverty

Transformation of urban poverty and homelessness into a tourism product



## REPRESENTATIONS OF POOR PEOPLE, TYPE OF POLICY AND UNDERLYING ORIENTATION

Representation	Policy	Orientation
<b>The good</b>	Charitable neo-paternalism	Pedagogical Compassionate
<b>The bad</b>	Zero tolerance Criminal populism Workfare	Repressive Punitive Disciplinary
<b>The ugly</b>	A wall-building policy “City cleanliness” “Hostile architecture”	Immunisation Displacement Reification

## ***WHAT CAN SOCIOLOGISTS AND SOCIAL WORKERS DO TO PROMOTE THE AGENCY OF POOR/HOMELESS PEOPLE?***

- Sociologists and social workers can play an important role in many ways in the process of the social recognition of poor and homeless people and in the reconstruction of their desire to aspire. For example, showing the empirical weakness of the causal links taken for granted in public discourse and political debate. They possess the tools needed to intervene in the planning of measures designed to counter social exclusion or to document the validity of such. They can draw attention to who/what lies at the margins, rather than who/what is in the centre and can even dispute the prevailing beliefs and the stereotyped representations we have examined up to this point. They can provide data for evidence based policies and interventions.



They could be able to promote innovative forms of **solidarity and community alliances** deeply rooted in daily material interaction and informal local social ties with subjects who apparently do not share the same class condition..

Very close to the idea of “togetherness” of Ash Amin and of “moral economy from below” of Fassin (2009)



# Capability for Voice of the Actors

The right to protest and the representation of the unrepresented



It has become increasingly difficult to operate according to shared principles of social justice, all the more necessary in a situation of diminishing resources, class fragmentation and increasing precarity

## DESIGNING AND MAKING WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE

- «Living in the dorm» is an action-research project started in 2009 in Italy to improve the quality of housing for vulnerable people.
- Provide free hairdressing for homeless woman
- Housing provision and catering activities to support women who have freed themselves from violence (casa Lorena).
- Housing first

## Anyway...

- Attempts to address challenges of pluralism through policies premised on ideas of community, capabilities of voice and so on are deeply problematic themselves
- Reduction of economic and social inequalities, welfare services, minimum wage politics, public housing, are also required. Any politics of togetherness in a society of strangers (those homeless people, racialized and/or minoritised groups who are marked culturally and politically as others, as outsiders, and as threats) cannot rest only on an ethos of recognition and community

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