
Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness or Rootlessness?

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Introduction

This paper has several objectives. These are: (1) to analyse the meaning of homelessness in the light of recent contributions on the meaning of home; (2) to criticize some current perspectives on homelessness as a social problem; (3) to identify and explore a number of different dimensions of the meaning of home and homelessness; (4) to reassess the evidence on the context of home and homelessness, and re-examine the meaning of homelessness in the light of that reassessed evidence; and (5) to explain the political meaning of homelessness as expressed in official definitions, legislation and state provision (or lack of it).

The meaning of home

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the meaning of home as a subject for empirical investigation and theoretical exploration — see, for example, Duncan (1981), Watson and Austerberry (1986), Marshall *et al.* (1988), Saunders and Williams (1988), Saunders (1989; 1990), Dickens (1989; 1990), Gurney (1990). There is deep disagreement among these authors, however, as to how 'home' is to be defined and analysed, how research is to proceed, and how the findings of research are to be interpreted. Gurney goes furthest in seeing home as an ideological construct created from people's emotionally charged experiences of where they happen to live (Gurney, 1990: 26–9): if home is really where the heart is, then it cannot be a 'socio-spatial system' (Somerville, 1989: 115). Consequently, Gurney dismisses Saunders's macrosociological approach: the home cannot be adequately understood in terms of 'taxonomic generalizations' (Gurney, 1990: 28). In this sense, 'home' is like 'city', and as a distinct intellectual enterprise a domestic sociology would be as weakly founded as is urban sociology. The contempt which Saunders displays for 'left-feminists' (Saunders, 1990: 33) therefore rebounds on him: as Gurney (1990: 33) recognizes, a strong and positive attachment to the home on the part of women is not incompatible with the existence of domestic relations which involve the exploitation and oppression of these same women. Women's ambivalence towards the home, as with their ambivalence towards their mothers (Leonard and Speakman, 1986), is hardly likely to be revealed through Saunders's type of investigation (see also Oakley, 1974: 103).

There is another sense, however, in which Gurney seems to go too far. If home is *only* an ideological construct, then it becomes meaningless to ask if someone really has a home or not. Consequently, Gurney argues that even the homeless have a home — for example, on the basis of Biebuyck (1982), he declares that for single people living rough

'the cultural milieu of life on the street became a means of redefining home' (Gurney, 1990: 23). Now it can be admitted that many street people do gain a *sense* of home from being adopted by more experienced ones (Randall, 1988; Lonsdale, 1990), but this does not mean that they have, or believe that they have, a *real* home (or what they would *call* a real home). Watson and Austerberry (1986) in particular have shown that homeless women commonly distinguish between their *ideas* of home, which may or may not figure in their current experience, and the reality of their living conditions, which they may or may not regard as home.

Gurney is therefore wrong to suggest that the meaning of home can be adequately encompassed by an 'experiential agenda' (Gurney, 1990: 40–1). Home is not just a matter of feelings and lived experience but also of cognition and intellectual construction: people may have a sense of home even though they have no experience or memory of it. Gurney is right, however, about home being an ideological construct, because the distinction which people make between home as ideal and home as experienced in actuality is itself socially constructed through ideological forms. We cannot know what home 'really' is outside of these ideological structures.

Watson and Austerberry's (1986) research revealed a number of different meanings of home, such as decent material conditions and standards, emotional and physical well-being, loving and caring social relations, control and privacy, and simply living/sleeping place (*ibid.*, 1986: 93–7). In contrast, their respondents defined homelessness as poor material conditions, lack of emotional and physical well-being, lack of social relations, control and privacy, and simply rooflessness (*ibid.*, 1986: 97–102). Interestingly, Watson and her co-researchers found that 30% of the women who did not consider their present accommodation to be their home did not define themselves as homeless, while 32% of the women who considered their present accommodation to be their home thought of themselves as homeless (*ibid.*, 1986: 92). These contradictions (having no home but not homeless, and having a home but homeless) are explained by the researchers in terms of respondents' adoption of the minimal definition of homelessness in the case of the first contradiction (that is, no home in a non-minimal sense, but not roofless), and of home in the case of the second contradiction (that is, having a place to sleep, but homeless in a non-minimal sense) (*ibid.*, 1986: 103). Such research serves to indicate the multi-dimensional complexity of meaning of home and homelessness, which will be explored further in the fourth section here.

In the light of what has been said about the meaning of home, official and 'common sense' definitions of homelessness can be seen to be inadequate. Official definitions are typically minimal, such as the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act (now Part III of the Housing Act 1985). The best known 'common sense' definition is that found in Bramley (1988: 26): 'lack of a right or access to their own secure and minimally adequate housing space'. This definition would appear to embrace only two dimensions of the meaning of homelessness, namely lack of control and privacy, and poor material conditions. The emotive aspects of homelessness, which could (following Gurney) be regarded as perhaps the most important, are entirely neglected by such an approach. An issue of deep human misery is thereby reduced to a problem which is merely technical (for example, housing supply shortages) and legal (for example, lack of citizenship rights).

Current explanations of homelessness

Homelessness, like home, is therefore an ideological construct, but to say this is not at all to dismiss it as 'unreal' or intellectually defective. Homelessness is ideologically constructed as the absence of home and therefore derivative from the ideological construction of home. As with home, then, the construction is one of both logic and emotion. People distinguish between the absence of 'real home' (ironically meaning a failure to experience

home in an *ideal* sense) and the lack of something which can be *called* home for them (meaning lack of abode). The meaning of homelessness, however, cannot be determined outside of the processes of ideological construction which give rise to such distinctions: there is no 'reality' of homelessness beyond the structures created by our intellects, experiences and imaginations.

In practice, most attempts to explain homelessness do not recognize it as ideologically constructed. Rather, they represent it as 'fact' and accept official or commonsense definitions. The minimal definition in terms of rooflessness tends to dominate the political debate, and rooflessness is usually explained by reference to either the ineffectiveness of housing demand or the defectiveness of housing supply. Neo-conservatives, for example, argue that rooflessness is due to the breakdown of family life or to the failures and inadequacies of individual heads of household. Neo-liberals contend that rooflessness is caused by distortions or imperfections in the housing market, especially the lack of a free market in rented housing (Minford *et al.*, 1987). In contrast, social democrats hold that rooflessness is a consequence of failure by both the market and the state to meet the needs of disadvantaged households (Clapham *et al.*, 1990).

All these explanations are inadequate. Neo-conservative explanations merely blame the victim and have nothing to say about the causes of supply deficiencies. Neo-liberal theories ignore the predominance of a free market in owner-occupied housing, which produces residualization of rented housing provision. A residualized sector cannot operate freely, and rooflessness is part of a wider problem of shortages and poor conditions associated with such a sector. Social democratic explanations are just superficial, in that it is precisely the failures of market and state which need to be explained.

The explanations are also inadequate at another level. Their conceptions of homelessness are too narrow, not only in the sense that they focus on the minimal meaning of homelessness but because they isolate this minimal meaning from its wider social and affective context. Neo-conservatives ignore the severe constraints which the economic and housing systems place upon individuals. Neo-liberals gloss over the poverty and misery which is associated with homelessness and which is always produced by freely operating markets. Social democrats tend to play down the role of state bureaucracy in reproducing the powerlessness and misery which the other theorists try to wish out of existence.

Better explanations of homelessness must therefore not only take account of the full range of meanings of homelessness, but also place homelessness in the broader contexts both of poverty and the housing system. For example, homeless people could form part of an 'underclass' or 'sub-proletariat', to be explained in Weberian or marxist terms, or in feminist or marxist-feminist terms. Weberian theories of 'underclass' stem largely from Rex and Moore (1967), though they were prefigured by American theories of a 'culture of poverty' (Lewis, 1961). In order to be part of an 'underclass' in the Weberian sense, homeless people would have to enjoy similar positions with respect to the labour market and live in similar conditions, excluded from the mainstream society of the 'middle mass' (R. Pahl, 1984; Dahrendorf, 1987). As roofless, they may have a shared position in the housing market, and therefore could be represented, perhaps rather fancifully, as a housing 'underclass'. In relation to the labour market, however, homeless people may be in all sorts of different positions, and *qua* homeless they do not have a common class position. Weberian theories would therefore appear to have only a limited application to the problem of homelessness, unless homelessness were to take the form of a more or less permanent condition for certain social groups, serving to perpetuate their exclusion from the labour market and from civil society generally.

Marxist conceptions of 'underclass' go back to Marx and Engels' use of the term 'lumpenproletariat' to characterize 'this scum of depraved elements from all classes' (Marx and Engels, 1968: 240). Marx and Engels had in mind primarily the criminal fraternity (i.e. the 'underworld'), not the poor or propertyless or powerless. However, by extension a marxist conception of an underclass in a capitalist society could include anyone whose

means of subsistence are not obtained through paid labour, profits, interest or rent (these being the bases for the major social classes of proletarians, capitalists, financiers and landlords, respectively). Today, such an underclass would include not only the 'criminal classes' but also all those who are wholly or mainly dependent upon state benefits and state provision for their survival. In addition, as Walby (1986) has suggested in another context, it would include 'housewives' who are wholly or mainly dependent on their husbands as 'breadwinners'. Most homeless people are indeed dependent on state benefits and provision, and could therefore count as members of an underclass in this sense.

As with the Weberian 'underclass', the marxist 'underclass' is disparate and incoherent. It has no distinct forms or organization, and no characteristic identity or consciousness. The 'underclass' is therefore not a class, and the term 'underclass' explains nothing, including homelessness.

Both Weberian and marxist approaches succeed in placing homelessness in the context of poverty, propertylessness and powerlessness, as well as of the operations of capitalist labour and housing markets. The theoretical analysis involved, however, appears to deal only with the context and not with the specifics of homelessness itself. Such approaches ignore certain dimensions of the meaning of homelessness and result in a failure to grasp adequately the market and state causes of homelessness. In contrast, a more satisfactory theory of homelessness will include an explanation of both housing market processes and state policies and action on homelessness as an integral part of the theory.

The analysis of home and homelessness

Homelessness, like home, is a multidimensional concept, but it does not mean just what we want it to mean. It should be possible, therefore, to analyse both concepts with a certain degree of objectivity. I have attempted to do this in a very provisional way, and the product of my attempt is outlined in Table 1. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that this is intended purely as a conceptual clarification, to stimulate debate and help to guide future research in this area. Considerable further empirical investigation is required in order to test the validity and utility of this conceptual construction.

Home can be argued to have at least six or seven dimensions of meaning, identified by the 'key signifiers' of shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots, abode and (possibly) paradise. Each of these signifiers can be explicated in terms of its wider symbolic meaning (its 'general connotation'), its evocation of a specific sense of security, and its characteristic mode of relating to oneself and to others. The selection of the signifiers is supported by Watson and Austerberry's (1986) empirical findings — for example, 'shelter' corresponds to decent 'material conditions', 'hearth' corresponds to 'emotional and physical well-being', 'heart' to 'loving and caring social relations', 'privacy' to 'control and privacy', and 'abode' to 'living/sleeping place'. Two signifiers have been added to these, however, namely 'roots' (which corresponds to a sense of individual identity) and 'paradise' (which connotes 'ideal home' as distinct from the home of everyday life). Taken together, all these signifiers comprise the meaning of home.

Home as *shelter* connotes the material form of home, in terms of a physical structure which affords protection to oneself, and which appears to others as at least a roof over one's head. Home as *hearth* connotes the warmth and cosiness which home provides to the body, causing one to relax in comfort and ensuring a welcoming and 'homely' atmosphere for others. Home as *heart* is very similar, but in this case the emphasis is on emotional rather than physiological security and health, with associated images of a happy home and a stable home, based on relations of mutual affection and support. Home as *privacy* involves the power to 'control one's own boundaries' (Ryan, 1983), and this means the possession of a certain territory with the power to exclude other persons from that territory and to prohibit surveillance of the territory by other persons.

Table 1a *The meaning of home*

Key signifier	General connotation	Sense of security	In relation to:	
			Self	Others
'Shelter'	Materiality	Physical	Protection	Roofing
'Hearth'	Warmth	Physiological	Relaxation	Homeliness
'Heart'	Love	Emotional	Happiness	Stability
'Privacy'	Control	Territorial	Possession	Exclusion
'Roots'	Source of identity	Ontological	Sense	Reference
'Abode'	Place	Spatial	Rest	Living/sleeping space
'Paradise'	Ideality	Spiritual	Bliss	Non-existence (?)

Table 1b *The meaning of homelessness*

Key signifier	General connotation	Sense of insecurity	In relation to:	
			Self	Others
Lack of shelter	Material deprivation	Physical	Exposure	Rooflessness
Lack of hearth	Coldness	Physiological	Stress	Alienating
Heartlessness	Indifference	Emotional	Misery	Instability
Lack of privacy	Powerlessness	Territorial	Surveillance	Vulnerability
Rootlessness	Anomie	Ontological	Senselessness	Lost
Lack of abode	Placelessness	Spatial	Restlessness	(Impossible!)
'Purgatory'	Ideality	Spiritual	Suffering	Non-existence (?)

Home as *roots* means one's source of identity and meaningfulness, involving a sense of security which is, as Gurney (1990) points out, not the same as emotional security. It is usually called 'ontological security' because it is concerned with one's sense of 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1967). To speak of a *source* of identity and meaning then implies the existence of a position in a structure of social relations which is somehow grounded in a wider web of cultural and linguistic meaning, and it is this wider meaning which familiarizes or domesticates the social structure for individual human beings. The notion of domestication is important here: the individual has roots in the world in so far as that world is ordered for them — that is, tamed. To the extent that the world is domesticated, it makes sense to one's own intellect and provides points of reference for that of others.

Home as *abode* corresponds to Watson and Austerberry's (1986) minimal definition of home, that is, anywhere that one happens to stay, whether it be a palace or a park bench. The minimal meaning of home requires merely that there be some place which can be called home, and the security associated with mere place is likewise minimal, that is, the security (if it can be so called) of a definite spatial position (though not necessarily a *fixed* position: for example, those 'of no fixed abode').

Finally, home as *paradise* is an idealization of all the positive features of home fused together. It could be argued that it is not part of the 'real' meaning of home because it is a creation of the private world of each individual, and is therefore impenetrable and non-existent for other individuals. The reason for including it, however, is that there is no clear demarcation between the real and the ideal: in each of its key signifiers, home is suffused with ideal meaning (for example, expressed in terms of what home *ought* to be like), and each human being to some extent shapes the reality of their home in accordance with their ideal of home.

To a very large extent, homelessness can be represented as the semantic contrary

of home (see Table 1b). This is certainly the case with the key signifiers of lack of shelter, lack of hearth, heartlessness, lack of privacy, rootlessness, lack of abode and 'purgatory' (or should it be 'hell'?); and with the senses of insecurity associated with those signifiers. It is not all as simple as this, however, because homelessness does not quite involve the converse of the *ideal* meaning of home. Home as hearth and heart, for example, has strong ideal connotations, and these connotations may be retained by homeless people even though their material underpinnings have disappeared. For the homeless, it is the reality which is different, but their ideal may be the same. This is why the minimal definition of homelessness is not lack of abode, which makes no sense in social terms, but lack of shelter or rooflessness. This also perhaps helps to explain why the real stress and misery of homelessness is ignored by others, reflecting the wider climate of coldness and indifference. Hence, policy develops only to assist the roofless, the vulnerable, and occasionally those who have lost their way. One implication of the analysis, however, is that homeless people themselves may experience homelessness as coldness and indifference, and therefore subscribe to fatalistic views. They may even, as in Biebuyck (1982), find their own sense of home as hearth and heart in conditions of extreme stress and utter misery.

The immediate context of home and homelessness

Conceptual analysis is only a beginning. The task now is to *explain* homelessness in all its dimensions of meaning. To this end, homelessness must first be placed in its immediate context. This context includes such features as the symbolic status of home, the significance of housing tenure, the nature of domestic relations, the relevance of housing supply and the politics of home and homelessness (the last two of these will be considered in the following section).

Apart from its key significations, home has *symbolic status*. Such status is expressed in design features (materiality); mode of disposition and action towards neighbours, visitors etc. (hearth); 'pride of possession' (Gurney, 1990: 16) (heart); degree of territorial control (privacy); degree of respectability and sense of niche (roots); and quality of domestic life (abode). Home is therefore set in a complex context of social status relations. Conversely, homelessness is distinguished by a lack of social status, invisibility or a 'problem' to others, with the homeless being seen as outcast and rejected, at the bottom of the social scale, disreputable and nicheless.

The meaning of home is independent of tenure in some respects, but related to it in others. As shelter, roots and abode, the meaning of home appears to be tenure-invariant, but as hearth, heart and privacy it seems to be tenure-variable. Owner-occupiers experience feelings of warmth and affection for their home which do not appear to be expressed by tenants (Saunders, 1990). Furthermore, owner-occupiers have greater power than tenants to determine what happens to their home, and this difference in degree of privacy is one aspect of the status difference between owner-occupiers and tenants. These tenure variations in the meaning of home are, however, as Gurney (1990) suggests, pretty shallow. This can be seen from the fact that it has been possible to analyse the meaning of homelessness without making any reference to tenure at all.

The evidence on domestic relations is perhaps more important for an understanding of home and homelessness than is an investigation of symbolic status or tenure. Such evidence ranges over the following areas: the domestic division of labour, the control and management of domestic resources, legal relations among household members, affective and economic relations between parents and children, domestic violence and child abuse, and patterns of household formation and dissolution. The literature on these topics is vast, and will not be reviewed here. The point in this paper is only to indicate how such literature places home and homelessness in context. For example, the sexist character of the domestic division of labour (Oakley, 1974; Edgell, 1980; R. Pahl, 1984; Osborn

et al., 1984; Jowell and Topf, 1988; Martin and Roberts, 1984) suggests that home will have a different meaning for women than for men. This difference is obscured, however, because of the nature of domestic work, as something done out of love instead of for material reward. For women and men alike, home is where the heart is, but love means unpaid caring and labour for women, whereas for men it means emotional stability and gratification. Gender differences in the nature of domestic love are complex and profound, and up to now surveys of what people mean by home have not been sophisticated enough to be capable of identifying them. Similarly, although homelessness means misery for both men and women, for men that misery will take the form of emotional deprivation, whereas for women it will mean the loss of their domestic role, a sort of domestic unemployment which could be much more serious for them (for instance, if they have no role as paid workers).

A second example is that of resource distribution in the home (Brannen and Wilson, 1987; J. Pahl, 1980; 1983). The literature indicates that men are more likely to *control* the household's resources, while women are more likely to be responsible for *managing* them. The meaning of home as a territorial possession is therefore likely to be rather different for women from what it is for men. One would expect that men would place more emphasis on formal legal ownership and property rights, whereas women would stress the informal facts of exclusive possession, users' rights and the implications of the day-to-day discharge of domestic responsibilities; this expectation needs to be explored and tested through further research. Thus, although homelessness means lack of privacy and dispossession for both men and women, for men it seems more likely to take the form of propertylessness, whereas for women it is more likely to mean the disruption of everyday routines. Again, this could mean that homelessness is more serious for women than for men.

One further example should suffice for the purposes of this paper. The term 'domestic violence' is commonly used to refer to assaults by men against their wives (Smith, 1989). How can the occurrence of such violence be squared with the meaning of home as bodily and emotional security? The answer is, quite simply, that 'domestic violence' is an inappropriate expression. The assaults in question follow a typical pattern (Dobash and Dobash, 1980): they occur outside as well as inside the home (Roy, 1982), the assailant is nearly always a man and the victim a woman (Smith, 1989), and the relationship between the assailant and the victim is always marital or quasi-marital (J. Pahl, 1985). Strictly speaking, therefore, this is not a domestic problem, but a problem of 'violent husbands' (*ibid.*). There is no contradiction in battered wives having a positive attachment to their home. Indeed, this may be part of the reason why battered wives do not easily give up their homes in order to escape the violence, although further research is required in order to test such a hypothesis.

It is at least possible, therefore, that the meaning of home is not significantly different for battered women from what it is for women in general, and so similarly with the meaning of homelessness. However, the experience of home for battered women becomes increasingly dangerous as time goes on, and unless the assailant can be successfully excluded from the home, homelessness may come to be seen as safer. The problem for women's refuges in this respect is that although they can provide the essential 'safe house', they can rarely restore the wider experience of home which the women have lost.

The wider context of home and homelessness: social and political relations

Placing home and homelessness in their context is therefore initially a matter of showing how the meanings of home and homelessness relate to features of the world in which we live — social status, tenure, domestic relations of production and reproduction, and so on. In a wider sense, however, the social world presents itself as *ordered* (not just a list

of features), and it is necessary to indicate how home and homelessness fit into this order. Order is usually conceived in terms of causal relations, but the notion of causality employed is rarely analysed. Since it makes little or no sense to talk of the causes of home, or even of the causes of the meaning of home, it can be concluded that the order we are concerned with here (and of which we are a part) is not a causal order. It is rather a logical order, comprising logical relationships between types of social relations. It is misleading, therefore, to refer to causes of homelessness, even though it seems to make sense to do so. What is at issue is not an event which precipitates an individual experience of homelessness (for instance, eviction 'causes' rooflessness), or an attribute which is statistically strongly associated with homelessness (for instance, the association between so-called 'broken homes' and rooflessness/emotional instability/vulnerability). Reference to such events and attributes does not explain anything in itself, but merely results in tautology (being made roofless makes one roofless) or draws attention to something which still needs to be explained (why should a broken home in the emotional sense of home be associated with absence of home in the material sense?). What needs to be done is to place home and homelessness in the context of the economic and political system which, for instance, both empowers evictions and privileges unbroken two-parent family households. The various 'causes' of rooflessness which are commonly mentioned (Drake, 1989), such as relationship breakdown, being asked to leave by friends or relatives, repossession by a landlord, rent arrears and mortgage arrears, all have to be understood and explained in terms of wider social forces.

This paper has argued that there is much more to homelessness than the minimal definition in terms of rooflessness. In official government perceptions and constructions, however, only the material meaning of homelessness is recognized. The dominant political definition of homelessness is therefore much narrower than that found by conceptual analysis, and this difference needs to be explained. In Britain the political debate has long been focused around the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, so any attempt to place homelessness in its wider social context could do worse than start with that Act. After that, the discussion could broaden quite logically into a consideration of the effects of housing market supply and demand, although the outcome of this will have to wait for another paper.

The Act represents first of all a *centralization* of state power, because it imposed a duty on local authorities to provide housing for homeless people in 'priority need', and therefore reduced the discretion of local authorities in their housing allocation policies. In this respect, homelessness policy is part of a wider process of state centralization which has been noted by many housing researchers (Malpass and Murie, 1990; Houlihan, 1988). As a consequence, the social problem of homelessness has begun to move from the local to the national level, although local policies on homelessness continue to be highly influential and richly variable (Clapham *et al.*, 1990, ch. 5).

Next, the Act contributed to the *residualization* both of council housing and of housing policy. It required local authorities to provide for the residuum who cannot cope in the housing market, and it marked a departure of housing policy from its previous concerns with mainstream housing shortages and housing market regulation (Balchin, 1989). In this respect, the Act is part of a wider process of residualization of the 'housing problem' in Britain related to the expansion of owner-occupation and (paradoxically) the postwar success of council housing in meeting the need for homes.

Further, the Act involved a significant shift in *professional* power from social services departments to housing departments of local authorities, because previously, under the 1948 National Assistance Act, responsibility for the homeless was a 'welfare' function rather than a housing function. In its context of poverty and powerlessness, homelessness had been successfully placed on the political agenda in the 1960s. By transforming homelessness policy into a specific area of housing professional expertise, the Act had the effect of depoliticizing homelessness, that is, removing it from mainstream political debate. And this occurred as part of a wider process of change in both professional power

and housing politics: a shift from production-orientated professions (such as architects, surveyors and engineers) to finance and management-orientated professions, corresponding to the decline of the politics of housing production and the political subordination of specifically housing objectives to wider aims of wealth redistribution and labour control (Malpass and Murie, 1990).

State centralization, residualization, housing professionalism, and the change in national housing politics are all interrelated, and the key to understanding the pattern of interrelationships is social class. Centralization has been primarily a response by the national ruling class to local working-class opposition to its policies. Residualization is an effect of the increasing predominance of owner-occupation, which is in no small measure due to the increased employment of married women (Munro and Smith, 1989), and the latter entails a certain gendering of the class structure (Marshall *et al.*, 1988). The class-determined predominance of owner-occupation then helps to ensure the growing state policy bias towards that tenure and away from council housing provision (Houlihan, 1988). And the political shift away from local authority housing involves ruling-class strategies of demunicipalization and dedemocratization (Byrne, 1989) which require state centralization in order to succeed.

The all-party support for the 1977 Act can be explained at one level in terms of ideological compromise, with Labour supporting the state provision for the needy and Tories attaching conditions to such provision in that the nuclear family unit has priority and only the 'deserving' are to be provided with housing (single people and 'intentionally homeless' people are excluded). The existence and stability of such a compromise, however, itself needs to be explained. This can be done by reference to the changing class relations which have produced *both* the residualization of council housing (which is therefore to continue to be provided as a housing of last resort) *and* the predominance of owner-occupation, which depends heavily on nuclear family organization (and is therefore reflected in policies which do little for the homeless generally, and nothing at all for the single homeless). Meanwhile, 2000–3000 people sleep on the streets of London (Hansard 14/12/90, col. 518), and the number grows daily.

Conclusion

The meanings of both home and homelessness are complex and multidimensional, and this paper has offered a preliminary analysis of those meanings. Both home and homelessness have been found to be essentially ideological constructs, involving compounds of cognitive and emotive meaning, and embracing within their meaning complex and variable distinctions between ideality and reality. Such an analysis, while being only preliminary, manages to avoid the epistemological and methodological pitfalls of realism, empiricism, idealism, materialism, rationalism, relativism, subjectivism and all the rest. Home and homelessness are seen as being socially constructed both as imagined ideality and as experienced and intellectualized reality.

Conceptual analysis is only a beginning: explanation is the end of all theoretical work. This paper has demonstrated the inadequacy of all one-sided explanations, which ignore intrinsic features of home and homelessness, and which abstract homelessness in particular from its immediate context. Explanations which attempt to make sense of the context of homelessness, however, deserve more serious consideration. Weberian, marxist and marxist-feminist theories have therefore been examined, and have been found wanting, mainly because in relating to the social context of homelessness they take too little account of the character of homelessness itself. The concept of 'underclass' and its cognates found in such theories is either too leaky or too ill-defined to be of great value in the understanding and explanation of homelessness. This is not to say, however, that these theories could not be modified and expanded so as to produce more enlightening formulations.

The first task of explanation, then, is to demonstrate the relationships of home and homelessness to their immediate contexts. Relationships considered in this paper have been those of cultural status and housing tenure, as well as a variety of types of domestic relations — husband-wife and parent-child relations; economic, legal and affective relations among household members; and so on. Considerable further work is now required in order to analyse these contextual relations and to test the implications of such analysis.

The final task of explanation is to reveal the embeddedness of home and homelessness in systems of social relations, and thereby get to the roots of the relevant processes of social construction. Explanation at this level identifies and elucidates an order of meanings in which home and homelessness are shown to play an integral part. The preliminary analysis undertaken in this paper indicates that class relations and class organization, especially when expressed through legal and political relations (involving, for example, processes of state centralization, policy residualization and professionalization) are crucial in determining the general character of this social order. There is therefore a clear potential for the further development and application of class theory to this particular area. This could be the beginning of a new sociology of housing.

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