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Homeless People's Transition from the Hidden World of Socialism to the Quasi-Welfare Social Safety of Contemporary Hungary: Evidence from Szeged



Abstract In Hungary, homelessness has reappeared in the 1990s as a kind of social problem and also as a phenomenon. The intention of this study is to show how homelessness has become visible to society and why the problem was perceived so late, despite the fact that homeless people were part of the socialist society, even if in a latent way. Fieldwork was carried out in Szeged, a city in southern Hungary after 2002. During the research, I have participated in the everyday lives of homeless groups as an observer; I have conducted interviews and examined the social networks, problems and possibilities of the homeless. In this study, I show that the Hungarian circumstances, politics and structural changes were different from their Western counterparts, since Hungary took a different path. This trajectory influences the fate of those who become homeless. Even so, twenty years after the end of socialism, a number of parallels with the West, and with the United States in particular, can be discerned.

Keywords homelessness, post-socialism, poverty, social exclusion, network

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Introduction

During the socialist era, homelessness was a marginal, hidden and understudied phenomenon essentially denied by officials, affecting primarily people who deliberately resisted socialist society, who could not function in it because of its debilitating problems, or who had criminal tendencies. The dramatic economic and social changes during the post-socialist period, however, fundamentally transformed the face of homelessness by adding a growing pool of marginalized people without apparent pathologies who simply could not adjust to the new neoliberal economic climate. The rise of this new type of homelessness and the persistence of old homelessness is aggravated by inadequate shelter provision and homeless service which forces homeless people to live in public places from where they are frequently displaced, and criminalization as a result. So while the proliferation and diversification of homelessness and its causes are primarily based on unique Hungarian circumstances and the dramatic shift from socialism to capitalism, the responses to the problems follow the American pattern with adverse effects on homeless people, their daily survival, and long-term life chances.

To substantiate this claim, I analyse both national and local data focusing primarily on ethnographic research I conducted in Szeged. Szeged is the third largest city in Hungary, though in general terms it might not seem as large (the current population is about 170,000). Historically, Szeged was an agricultural and commercial town until the building of the university in the first third of the twentieth century. In the socialist era, industrial institutions were built by the municipality; these were closed down after the end of the socialist era. However, the city, still plays an important role in the region both from an economic and a cultural point of view. As regards the homelessness, impoverished individuals from nearby settlements apparently believe that they can find a solution to their problems by moving to Szeged. Lacking resources, many become homeless and take up residence in the public places of the city. Research on homelessness is particularly important at this time because little attention has been paid to homelessness in Hungary in the past. One of the intentions of this paper is to show how the 'hidden poverty' of state socialism continues to manifest itself in the post-socialist era while the phenomenon of 'new poverty' is simultaneously created. One part of this new poverty is homelessness, a topic which did not officially exist during the socialist period and was considered taboo. Social scientists started to study poverty during the mid and late 1980s, i. e. during the years that are often referred to as 'soft communism' (BOKOR 1987; FERGE 1982; GÖNCZÖL 1982 and 1991; KEMÉNY 1979; EBERSTADT 1988; HÖJDESTRAND 2003). As we will see, increasing poverty have become obvious when many forms of unemployment, homelessness and permanent social deprivation were perceived. Since 1990, scholars have often concentrated on specific aspects of post-socialist economic and social changes, but poverty has received little attention from an anthropological or geographical point of view. To be precise, some aspects of poverty – such as rural poverty, the plight of the Roma, or the youth in urban housing – have been examined, but there have been only a few in-depth researches on the wider spectrum of poverty caused by capitalist development.

Neither the new poor, nor the winners of the post-socialist transformation have gained the attention of Hungarian social scientists, since native ethnographers have conducted almost no fieldwork in urban areas (for a few exceptions, see KÓBÁNYAI 1980 and 1982; KÜRTI 2002; SIMONYI 1995). Foreign anthropologists, meanwhile, have dealt predominantly with the concerns of post-socialist economy, such as market transition and the dismantling agricultural cooperatives. Therefore, being both Hungarian citizens and working as native observers, scholars working in Hungary may bring some unique perspectives to the study of homelessness. I am going to

apply this insider–outsider perspective in this paper in order to introduce the phenomenon of new poverty through the changes in Hungarian history and economy. These are changes that give new features to the culture of homelessness which becomes different in this way from that of those countries where this aspect of poverty developed gradually (see COSTA NUNEZ 1996; HAZRA 2005).

In this paper, I examine first the history of hidden poverty and criminalized homelessness in socialism in order to set the stage for homelessness’s manifestation in post-socialist Hungary. An examination of the rise of new homelessness” after 1989 shows the particular nature of homelessness in a country that “bypassed” Keynesian welfarism on the way to neoliberalism. While this history has assured marked differences with “American-style” homelessness, I will show that there are significant similarities as well.

The taboo: poverty in socialism

The Image of Poverty towards the End of State Socialism

Under socialism, poverty was rarely, if ever, discussed and the concept of impoverishment basically meant departure from the average income and lifestyle (SZALAI 1997. 1403). Impoverishment implied deprivation of power and personal rights, as well as departure from what was considered to be a respectable manner of life (BOKOR 1987). Alcohol consumption, misuse of income, poor health, careless hygiene and low levels of education were all noticeable aspects of the society of poverty in Hungary under socialism. Education had low prestige for the poor, while establishing a family and getting a job had more importance. At the same time, for some, alcohol consumption had greater significance than maintaining a certain standard of living; a trap which often led to crime or domestic abuse directed at the consorts (men or women) or children.

Though the deterioration of homes due to the inability of residents to maintain or renovate was indeed observed by town councils, citizens and researchers (see TIMÁR–NAGY 2007), especially in suburban districts, such evidence of poverty did not generate much public discussion, because most of these poor people had jobs, and relatively respectable lives. Consumption of alcohol was generally accepted by family members (as well as by researchers), while violence or mounting debts were often ignored. During the last decade of the socialist rule, poverty as such was still considered a shameful and invisible aspect of social life (BOKOR 1987). Thus, marked deprivation was often considered solely to be a phenomenon occurring amongst marginal groups who were often described as hobos, tramps and ‘dangerous’ idlers. Others successfully concealed their deprived status by seclusion or withdrawal from society, such as those who managed to keep their jobs, but lived in workers’ hostels, a very common type of accommodation in Hungary which provided temporary shelter for unaccompanied workers for a nominal fee. In retrospect, some scholars in the post-socialist period have started to see hostel dwellers and the “concealed homeless” of the socialist era.

Street Life during Socialism: Dossers, Tramps, and Criminal Idlers

Although homelessness as such was known during the socialist regime, it was not defined as such. In the scholarly literature, one can find negative labels used to describe homeless

people, such as hobos, tramps¹ and criminal idlers² (see UTASI 1987). A tramp is a person who wanders between settlements and roams the countryside occasionally accepting menial work, but basically preferring easier ways of earning money. Some of them – mainly younger ones – armed themselves with a specific ideology as they left home, saying that they were escaping from obligations and authority figures, such as parents, the workplace as well as schools. The sweet taste of freedom appealed to them, particularly in the summertime when many of them moved out temporarily to sleep under the stars. Many of these former hobos now have respectable homes and employment. Dossers³ have also changed their lifestyle, although they appeared predominantly in the squares and parks of larger towns and were visible at rock concerts. Their Hungarian name (*csöves*) may derive from the large pipes at construction sites in which they frequently slept in (UTASI 1987. 181.). A few youngsters were recruited to live in grounds from criminals and school drop-outs who had chosen to escape from parental authority, but they live outside periodically when they wanted. Finally, there were those who were brought to the same fate by having a disability which prevented them from being integrated into homeless society; therefore they lived alone.

Youngsters – an overlapping category – managed to get by through a number of means, doing odd jobs, pickpocketing, stealing, begging, forging prescriptions, pimping and prostitution. Older homeless people lived on collecting litter or even cheating by selling counterfeit gold. Naturally, these activities were regarded as illegal by both the homeless and the state. Indeed, government policy regarded unemployment as a dangerous menace to society and those youngsters who did not start work immediately after finishing school – putting off becoming employed for a while so that they could live a vagrant life, or just living without working – were seen as parasites, maniacs or criminally idle (FERGE 1982). The status of the homeless did not only draw social disapproval; *thepolice* could intervene and send them to work (interview with M.R., a former criminal idler 1998/2⁴).

Almost no homeless in the socialist era slept in the streets; perhaps they slept mostly on park benches in the summer. They preferred to live in summer cottages which were temporarily vacant, condemned buildings, cabins built without authorization, or bed-shares.⁵ Some of

¹ Tramps (*csavargó*). Like dossers, tramps lived on the streets, but unlike dossers, they had no homes to return to. Tramps often finished school, became unemployed, begged and lived by casual labour. Some dossers and tramps tried to live 'outside' society, drawing on an ideology against the established order.

² Criminally idle, criminal idler (*közveszélyes munkakerülő*). During the socialist era, a person's status was dependent on their employment. Those who did not seek employment, or did not find a job in a short time, were considered penal idlers. According to the public opinion of the time, they were a threat to the existing order and the building of socialism, as they would not participate in it. This label was noted on their identity papers, and policemen checking their identities could march them away, or from time to time the local government offered them work.

³ Dossier (*csöves*). In the socialist era, youngsters living on the streets were called dossers. Many of them escaped from parental supervision to the streets, while some of them began living in public spaces as truants. Their name originates from the drainage tubes (*csövek*), found on building sites, in which they took shelter. Most of them lived only temporarily on the streets. Their characteristic clothing also separated them from other youth subcultures: 'tube-like' trousers, long pullovers, studded leather jackets, gas mask shoulder bags.

⁴ The numbers after the citation of interview means the year and the serial number of interview with a certain person.

⁵ Bed share (*ágybérlet*). The severe housing shortage made it impossible for all workers to find places in hostels or to rent a room in a flat. People desperate for some kind of shelter could rent a bed in a room holding 10 to 15 beds, with no access to cooking or other facilities.

them intended to spend the winter in labour hostels, hospitals or mental hospitals, while others considered prisons as a possible solution to their seasonal accommodation needs (for all these, see KÓBÁNYAI 1980; UTASI 1987; interview with MALAC 2002/5).

Redundant Workers in Work Places and Workers' Hostels

Workplaces and workers' hostels⁶ both produced hidden unemployment and homelessness (SPÉDER 2002. 45), especially at the end of the socialist era when many workplaces and almost all workers' hostels ceased to function. Workplaces had a surplus of labour, a phenomenon well-known from the era of state socialism which created problems for both employers and employees. These were not obvious at first, because no one in the workplace seemed idle. Everyone worked – socialist ideal was the full employment – but surplus workers produced an unused surplus of goods that piled up in warehouses (FERGE 1982).

For labourers, cheap workers' hostels provided temporary accommodation, but these were the permanent or only homes for many⁷ in reality (LÁNG–NYILAS 1987. 33.; VERES 1979; OROSS 2001). As Mátyus (1978) pointed out, hostels helped temporarily, but they did not provide a future. Hostel dwellers worked long hours in order to earn more money, but they did not save and instead spent considerable sums on leisure, and often got into disastrous personal relationships that produced an even greater cultural gap between them and the mainstream society (MÁTYUS 1978). The majority of hostel residents were from peasant backgrounds; consequently their former community could not protect them in the city, as Kürti describes for the workers in Csepel (2002). Becoming an urban factory worker meant that most of the time these formerly rural dwellers abandoned social ties with their home communities. Despite the fact that alienation and helplessness was a characteristic feature of this world it still left an empty space when hostels were closed. Those who had hostel accommodation provided by the state, or who had neglected their relationships with the communities from which they came, had no place to go (LÁNG – NYILAS 1987). If they had a job or savings they could rent accommodation. Those who did not have, or lost their jobs, had no other choice but to live on the streets. However, the argument that hostels concealed homelessness is not entirely true. They were rather institutions that helped migration towards urban centres, especially for those who originally came from the countryside. However, emerging social, cultural or generational conflicts inside the family led to a situation where rural youth could not return and became powerless urban dwellers. The workers' hostels started disappearing in the first few years of capitalism, and ultimately made homelessness more visible, but in order to understand how, it is crucial to understand the specific social and economic transformations of post-socialism.

⁶ Workers' hostels (munkásszállás). In order to satisfy the labour demands of rapidly developing industrial production, companies established hostels which provided accommodation for workers 'enticed' from the countryside. There were separate hostels for men and women. People living in these considered them a temporary solution, but sometimes a temporary solution became a long-term one. On workers' hostels in Budapest, see KÜRTI (2002).

⁷ OROSS (2001) says that 92 thousand people lived in workers' hostels in the 1980s and approximately 30 thousand of them lived effectively as homeless.

The challenges of postsocialism

From Socialism to Capitalism – Overall Trends

With the collapse of socialism, the pseudo-system of security offered by the state vanished. Poorer people had to contend with serious changes in the early post-communist years. Meanwhile, they saw a change in those values that had seemed to be evident before: self-identity, ideology and faith in their own ability (ŠIKLOVÁ 1996. 537–539.; cf. LAKI 2003. 129.). As full employment ended, a need for highly trained and educated professionals emerged due to the closing of large factories, mines and state enterprises during the transformation to a market economy. Thus, there was much less need for manual labourers; so blue-collar workers could expect job security or find new jobs no longer, and the threat of unemployment suddenly became a much-discussed topic in public discourse (LAKI 2003). In socialism, because of the complete employment concept, the criminal idlers' number was around 2.000, but after the transition, the unemployment rate had grown up to 16.1% (see NAGY 1994).

Similarly, the socialist housing system went through some basic changes. City council houses⁸ were no longer built, and consequently prices jumped sky-high (see KORNAI 1980. and 2007). Mortgage repayments became difficult for many, so was the acquisition of first flats for young family members. Workers' hostels and workplaces closed down at the same time. Those people who were not able to go home found themselves suddenly in a very uncertain situation. Contractors in the 'second economy'⁹ adjusted to the unstable market conditions by employing workers illegally whose futures remained uncertain (BORBOLY et al. 2003. 195.; SIMONYI 1995. 65–66.; see also JANCUS 2002. 63–66) because they could anytime lose their jobs and livelihood; at the same time they had problems associated with their illegal work status, such as the lack of benefits and social security pensions. After the socialist era, alcohol abuse increased during working hours, and this became the reason for possible dismissal. Those who could not adopt to the new employment standards obviously faced unemployment.

During the socialist period, workers' incomes were not high, but one could still live off them. People of lower social classes could utilize more of their earnings, because the state subsidized some consumer goods. Moreover, payday could be celebrated with small events such as dining at a restaurant, going for a drink, or celebrating name days¹⁰ and anniversaries. Holidays and travel, meanwhile, were supported by trade union holiday vouchers which could be used at the union's own holiday resort for labourers. It was a particular feature of Hungary at the time that income was untaxed and contributions to trade unions were set at a low amount. To balance the losses of badly run state enterprises, the government taxed profitable companies. Thus there were neither enough funds in the state budget for the recreation of labourers at trade union resorts, nor financial aid for travelling. All this state support – subsidized consumer goods, trade union

⁸ The proportion of the houses owned by the city councils – especially blocks of flats – was 60% in new built quarters in the socialist era, but some years after the transition it decreased to 8% by the privatization and the annulations of systematic building. Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office.

⁹ Second economy (második gazdaság). The second economy was based on work outside working hours. Lots of workers used to run a farm or take small jobs at home to supplement their family's income. They saved their strength during work time for the second economy. It was not illegal, because there were no income tax or laws about market production at the time; but these activities reduced the productivity of the first economy.

¹⁰ Every single day in calendar is attached to a name (previously a name of a saint) and whoever wears that name, celebrates the day on the certain date by inviting separately colleagues and family members to drink and eat.

benefits and so on – ceased immediately after the fall of socialism. At the same time, incomes remained at the same level (LAKI 2003. 128–29.), prospects became uncertain, and spending on recreation and leisure decreased.

Formerly, moonlighting for secondary incomes¹¹ provided a reliable supplement to salaries, as numerous companies closed in the new economic climate, so this sort of money became the sole means of support for many people. They had to use all their knowledge and experience to adapt to the market economy. Formerly, raw materials, tools, and warehouse stock “wandered” to the second economy or to agricultural cooperatives’ household plots. Moonlighting employees could use both their knowledge and their ‘borrowings’ to their benefit. Although there was a period of transition when a person’s knowledge of this sort could help them get a foothold in the new system, with the institutionalisation of market economy such “moonlighting” and “borrowing” became more difficult. By 1995, those who could not adapt found themselves unemployed or at risk of unemployment, while those who had gained practical experience from moonlighting were much more successful in the new economy.

Post-socialism and Neoliberal Poverty in Hungary

After the transition, the government put the emphasis on resolving economic problems, while social issues were ignored. The responsibility of individuals grew as the state cut back its social provisions. The causes of this shift were, as TÓTH (1994. 313.) points out, “partly the conscious reform politics and partly the outcome of economic transition, which changed the institutional structure [of welfare].” With the end of socialism, and without the step of an intermediary Keynesian welfare state, Hungarian society suddenly had to confront a new world of individual independence *and* individual liability. Welfare expenditure rapidly decreased, access to subsistence allowances became more difficult, and citizens’ administrative loads and burdens grew. Subsidies were gradually removed from energy producers leading to an increase in consumer prices and to increased expenditures on basic necessities. Previously, essential goods were not subjected to VAT, but a tax on such goods was soon introduced. Taxes also increased on luxury goods, such as alcohol and tobacco, of which homeless people are disproportionate consumers.

Anyway, in the early 1990s, it was already clear that welfare expenditures *increased* as a percentage of GDP compared to the 1980s (TÓTH 1994), even the real value of welfare services decreased. During the recent years, welfare expenditures have continuously decreased (especially spending on health and public education), and so have remaining price supports. Under socialism, and during the first years of the transition, for example, health care was free to all and paid from the taxes; now it is available only to medical insurance policy holders.

As a result of these shifts, post-socialist poverty primarily affects two groups. The first is comprised of the poor and deprived from the socialist era who carried this status into the post-socialist period. The second group is made up of those who fell into poverty from relatively good, lower-middle-class positions. Unemployment and loss of social status impacted these groups heavily during the 1990s (see NAGY 1994; SPÉDER 2000 and 2002). The main reasons for this fall were either retirement (as pension programs were destroyed) or failure as an entrepreneur in the new market economy (cf. SPÉDER 2002. 103.; see also SPÉDER 2000). Wherever they had come

¹¹ Secondary incomes (mellékes or mellékes jövedelem) derived from work undertaken as a part of the second economy.

from, the main concerns for the new poor were loss of savings, and thus the compulsion to live day to day, with the resultant problems ranging from the need to find casual or illegal work to the lack of medicines, to the precariousness of housing, as making mortgage or rent payments became more difficult (LAKI 2003; SIMONYI 1995). Under the pressure of such processes, family networks have frayed and social isolation of the poor has become common.

The sudden threat of unemployment (with the end of lifetime work guarantees) impacted people both materially and emotionally. The mass dismissals which peaked between 1992 and 1995 (LAKI 2003) combined with the formerly “hidden” unemployment problem of the socialist era culminated in a crisis. The problem was so widespread that mutual assistance became almost impossible; people could not spare money, possessions, or other resources (LAKI 2003). “Self-exploitation” among those who were still employed increased as they worked hard to preserve their jobs and support their families. Those who could, undertook casual work and for many this was the only option. Some worked illegally (*feketemunka, svarc*) to earn a living, which was better than doing nothing. Even so, the chances of obtaining and maintaining a flat for both the new and the old poor continued to worsen. Those who had bought flats with loans could not be sure that they could meet payments. Coupled with the rising energy costs, increasing numbers of poor and lower-middle class residents found themselves in a bind, unable to afford both housing payments and energy bills. Some who fell behind on mortgages or rent moved in with other family members. Others went to homes for the elderly, if they could. The rest had to live on the streets.

A new phenomenon: homelessness

Notwithstanding the existence “dossers”, “tramps”, and “idlers”, homelessness *of this sort* was unknown in the socialist era. People who were integrated into the society had jobs (FERGE 1982. 91.) and those who had jobs had a place to live. People who “chose” homelessness – the dossers, tramps, and idlers – were despised by society. Now, however, those who lost their jobs often lost their place in hostels as well. And still others with physical or other limitations could not find work at all and as a consequence they could not afford to live in society. Many of those thrown onto the streets in these ways lost all their possessions in the process, compounding their poverty.¹² The increasing numbers of such people – their presence in the streets of Hungarian cities – first brought widespread notice, and social concern, in the winter of 1992 (IVÁNYI 1997). The first civil initiatives – shelters for the homeless, temporary and daytime homes, food distribution – began at this time. But it has also become clear that state intervention in the growing crisis was unlikely.

The Scale of the Problem

According to best estimates, 11 percent of the population was deprived of essential goods (a proxy for the people in poverty) and 20 percent was at risk of becoming poor in the last decade of socialism (BOKOR 1987). (These estimates are inexact. Bokor [1987] emphasizes that under socialism “poverty” could not be truly examined: in addition to its “forbidden” political status, there was a lack of “poverty identity,” or means of readily identifying the poor¹³.) However, after

¹² Of course, those few who voluntarily choose homelessness out of an ideological or other commitment or a sense that the freedom of the street is better than the confines of the house also choose to live with minimal possessions (cf. MAY 2000. 745–748).

¹³ Researchers therefore had to construct creative ways to probe the depths of poverty in socialist Hungary, especially since many individuals would not answer direct questions out of a sense of shame, distrust of au-

the demise of socialism, researchers have developed new metrics of poverty more amenable to statistical description (SPÉDER 2002). Using such techniques, poverty was shown to be 13 percent in 1997,¹⁴ but some 30 percent more of the population was at risk of poverty because of financial difficulties (SPÉDER 2002. 57.). By this time, a generally accepted social idea of poverty – a “poverty identity” – emerged and surveys could be made among those who identified themselves as “poor”. Some 25 percent of the Hungarian population defines itself as poor. Given the differing metrics used in surveys, it is hard to know whether the 13 percent or 25 percent figure is the more accurate one. What is clear, however, is that the number of people at risk of homelessness in the new Hungary is not insignificant.

Obtaining an accurate number of how many people actually *are* homeless is difficult. The first census of homelessness, conducted in 2005, recorded approximately 10,000 homeless people. Yet, many scholars dispute this figure, because there were no fixed criteria on which fieldworkers could base their estimates. For instance, in my hometown, Szeged, census-takers reported only thirteen homeless people, because they only counted them with a “homeless lifestyle” – those who actually lived on the street and received no government support. Consequently, more than 560 people were left out by the census-takers, because they had contacts with social institutions (in addition, other homeless people simply refused to take part in the census). Expert estimates of the number of homeless people in Szeged are that in 2005 there were between 800 and 1200 people who lived on the streets or in the surrounding city (interview with K.J., executive director of a shelter). Neither the number of homeless persons in other communities in the region, nor the ratio of counted people to uncounted is known. Across the country, while shelters and soup kitchens have not reached full capacity yet, turnover in daytime homes surpasses their capacity.

The Beginnings of a Response

Over the course of the past decade, the number of shelters (hostels) for the homeless, daytime support services, and street social workers has been slowly increasing. A commissioner of homeless affairs has also been appointed. At the same time, however, the neoliberal central government has stressed homelessness as an individual’s rather than a direct social problem. Cities and towns have been granted extended powers to regulate activities – ranging from smoking to begging – in public spaces. As gentrification has advanced, homeless people are more and more pushed out of view (TIMÁR – NAGY 2007), and candidates for public office have begun to promise to make the homeless disappear if elected. Decision makers have turned to western “best practices” for creating cities that cater to tourists and wealthy city-dwellers, stressing the importance of a clean city for public health, aesthetic, and tourism purposes (see also AMMAN 2000; MITCHELL 1997).

With the withdrawal of state aid for the poor, and despite the availability of some European Union money for addressing homelessness, charity-based aid (often religiously oriented) has arisen to fill the holes of the tattered social safety net (providing hostels, daytime facilities, food aid, etc.). Human rights-centered activism about homelessness has also begun to function. Yet, in common with private charity and activist-based interventions elsewhere in Europe and the United States, charities in Hungary perpetually struggle with a lack of resources. This problem is

thority, or a fear that is they complained they might be punished. Usually they developed data from indirect questions about informants’ lives. Typically researchers asked about material goods that informants had or did not have (such as access to cooking facilities or sufficient food) and from that determined general minimum stands of living. On the basis of that general standard, researchers could ask, “what do people lack in relation to that minimum standard” and thereby derive estimates of poverty.

¹⁴ This is roughly equivalent to the U.S poverty rate at the same time (BURT et al 2001).

compounded by a general scepticism, perhaps inherited from the socialist era stating that charity is little more than a way to earn money. Support for charity-based aid is thus highly unstable.

Such facts structure the everyday lives of homeless people in Hungarian cities.

Homelessness in Szeged

Becoming and Being Homeless

Through in-depth life-history (PÁSZKA 2007) interviews, my homeless informants recounted their past experiences; the reasons for their becoming homeless and their past and current experiences of being homeless. Several recurring motifs became obvious: homeless people saw their homelessness as a reflection of society's morals, for example, while also wanting to sensationalize their own histories. Nevertheless, the main trajectories towards homelessness can be revealed from their stories. When asked to describe how and why they became homeless, most of my informants in Szeged referred both to the transition to the post-socialist society and economy, and to the role of conflicts and conflict-resolution mechanisms in their pre-homeless lives. They referred to the uncertainty that dominated their lives as industrial and agricultural workers and how their adjustment to the new conditions of the transition had failed. In addition, most of them referred, with a kind of detachment, to the inconsistency of their present life lead almost entirely by chance with the one they had hoped to have.

1. Structural and Individual Factors

Becoming homeless is partly a structural, partly an individual process (cf. BURT *et al.* 2001). Homeless respondents in Szeged pointed to the structural causes of their homelessness by mentioning the changes in the structure of the economy after socialism. But they also named other structural causes emanating from changes in social policy. They talked of permanent unemployment and the instability of illegal (black) employment, and the redundancy of the semi-skilled labour force, as well as the closure of workers' hostels, and deteriorating conditions of housing as significant causes of their homelessness. They also pointed to the lack of rehabilitative services for those who are released from prisons and orphanages. And, as the economy has hardened, they talked about how owners of tiny amounts of capital – micro-entrepreneurs – have been squeezed out. The inability to pay bills or meet the rent or mortgage payments were also discussed. But homeless people also spoke of psychiatric problems,¹⁵ and alcohol abuse,¹⁶ as the main individual reasons for becoming homeless, but informants also linked their homelessness to stays in prison, difficult family situations, divorce, and “bad decisions”. It is apparent that the combination of these structural and personal factors – and an individual's capacity to cope with them – matters on the path to homelessness in a city like Szeged.

2. Characteristics of Homeless People in Szeged

In Szeged, most homeless people are male; rarely women or children are rarely found amongst the homeless.¹⁷ If a woman does become homeless, it is caused by similar reasons as in

¹⁵ Sullivan *et al.* (2000) note that those homeless people, who suffer from mental illness, also typically suffer from other serious health and social problems. Many of the homeless in Szeged have mental disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, and others. Such homeless people are particularly at risk of social isolation and disintegration.

¹⁶ Some 10 percent of the Hungarian population suffers from alcoholism (ELEKES 2000).

¹⁷ One cause of this situation, according to many homeless men, is that when they divorced, their wives took

the case of men. Alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment and the lack of education are common factors contributing to homelessness among both men and women. Unlike in the United States where racial groups are over-represented homeless people are mostly white in Szeged – from the majority – with only a few professing themselves to be Gypsies (Roma). This might be the case, because the ties in Gypsy families are strong, especially as far as the sharing of resources among extended family members is concerned. Even so, the proportion of homeless Gypsies seems to be greater in other Hungarian cities. This is probably caused by the functioning of great cities like Budapest as a magnet for unattached, disaffiliated people of all sorts, and by the fact that in other more industrial cities, where the breakdown of the hostel system coincided with Gypsy overrepresentation. Furthermore, Gypsies make up a disproportionate number of beggars (who are not always homeless) in Szeged. White homeless people often resort to illegal or casual labour before begging. In addition, “entrepreneurs” import Gypsies from Romania to work on the streets of Hungarian cities (interviews with Dóm homeless group). Finally, the number of immigrants is growing; they come mainly from Africa and move in and out the homeless hostels.

Interviews make it clear that the homeless world is a world defined by men. While women live and work in it, they have very little control over the social framework of which they are part. Men determine the hierarchies that define everyday life, sometimes using physical or psychic violence as a mean of consolidating their authority. Homeless life is territorial as well, with a homeless man serving almost as “owner” of the territory, for whom women (and the few homeless children) act as kind of “employees.” Homeless worlds are in this way *more* patriarchal than the large, ambient world; women are less equal than in general society.

Power and prestige in homeless networks are determined primarily by the ability to secure income and arrange accommodation (educational attainment, for example, has little part in gaining prestige among the homeless in Szeged). On the top of the hierarchy of prestige are the ones with semi-permanent employment; daily workers follow, “illegal” workers (excluding beggars), market traders, beggars, freeloaders, and recyclers of used materials are in line (cf. UTASI 1987). Those who gain resources through assault, robbery, or prostitution (among other proscribed behaviours) are largely considered outcasts in the homeless society. Among city-dwelling homeless people, those who live independently look down on those who resort to the hostels; but both the hostel-residents and those living independently on the street look down on independent homeless living in the forests on the outskirts of town. The ability to survive a winter outdoors bestows a prestige almost as great as having a regular income (through pension, disability relief, or welfare payments), because it shows great survival skills.

3. *Connections, Social Exclusion and Inclusion: How the Homeless Remain Homeless*

Through my research, it is apparent that so-called strong relations among homeless people (and their housed family, friends, and colleagues) tend to erode and become increasingly conflict-ridden over the time. As older (pre-homeless) relationships deteriorate, homeless peoples’ connections to those outside the homeless world tend to be structured around the ability and willingness of non-homeless persons to contribute to the raising of the status of homeless individuals. These relationships tend to be quite instrumental in nature. Increasingly,

possession of their homes, though there is no doubt that the chains of causality are much more complex than that.

homeless people form relationships only among themselves. But these relationships are often weak expressed through friendliness and collegiality which is informal and transitory, waning as quickly as they waxed.¹⁸ At the same time, many homeless people argue that possibilities for escaping homelessness are hindered by their fellows. Together with the already described hierarchal relationship between many homeless people – a relationship that replicates a patron-client form – it is obvious that the narrow band of relationships that homeless people maintain can be one of the major factors of keeping them homeless.

Necessity and mutuality go hand in hand, because homeless people depend on each other for survival: needs require mutuality, and mutuality helps to fulfil needs. These require and result in a constant presence in each others' lives, so homeless people share food, drink, tobacco and dwelling place; they also protect each other. Among the lifestyle and the in-group direction of their connections, a common loss of faith in the future, and physical and mental deterioration, all perpetuate the state of homelessness for homeless people in Szeged. As time passes, these factors become more and more serious: the more time they spent on the street, the less chance they have of escaping and starting a new life. This mutual dependency leads to inescapable homelessness, which cannot be interpreted without understanding the context of being excluded from the main structures of post-socialist society (NAGY 2004). Being homeless means not only a physical exclusion from society, but also exclusion from regular social processes. Homeless people are considered to be outside the mainstream society and culture, members of which leave the homeless on their own both symbolically and literally (CALDEIRA 1999. 102–105; FRANKFURT 1997; JORDAN 1996. 81.). Living on the street and some phenomena associated with it, such as alcohol abuse, results in social disapproval; moreover even the social institutions charged with helping the homeless become stigmatized.

Houses and homes – so taken-for-granted by the housed majority – symbolize a world of order by providing security and a feeling of importance. Without these, a person is considered to be insecure, insignificant, defenceless and deprived. The homeless are deprived of their security and the means for fulfilling their own desires. In addition, they are deprived of their civil rights (cf. LYNCH 2002). Although homeless people can theoretically vote, they often cannot exercise this right as they have no registered permanent address or they have sold their ID cards. As a result, the homeless lack essential civil rights which adds one more dimension to the structures that keep them homeless.

4. Use of Public Space and the Criminalization of the Homeless

In the recent years, a few places in Szeged have been “monopolized” by the homeless, and as a result there has been an effort to “reclaim space” by both the local government and other city dwellers. From the early 1990s, Hungarian homeless people have become more visible as occupiers of public space and many other residents complained that they have no access to these places. Public areas are technically open to everyone, but as individual homeless people began to mark them as their own domestic spaces, housed residents turn away. The meaning and nature of space changed: public space was no longer the impersonal space of the city, now it was the intimate space of someone's home. From the perspective of the homeless people, their occupation of public space becomes a kind of legitimate homesteading, marked by territorial control. Many

¹⁸ Burt et al (2001) reveal the distinctions between well-connected and isolated homeless people, but their analysis needs to be complemented with an examination of the quality of the relationships that homeless people establish.

public places, the niches between buildings, park benches, cemetery crypts, sections of forest land, and so on, have gone through a process of colonization.

There is a social and geographical order in this colonization. As a 43-year old homeless man explains: “This place is ours, mine and my brother’s. If another tramp turns up, we tell him to leave this place as this place is ours. All who help us, come back here, for they know that they find us here. It’s been ours since last year. Formerly no one was here, only a beggar, no one else. The promenade belongs to the Csibaks, and Tibor is there, too. Sometimes we come around, but we never work [i.e. beg] in their place” (Interview Ocskó F., 2002, Dóm square). Even so, territorial challenges often lead to skirmishes or even violent fights.

Cities have responded in numerous ways. Szeged was the first Hungarian city to pass an anti-panhandling law to outlaw begging. Now it is illegal not only to beg, but also to clean car windows. The city has installed arm rests across benches to make it impossible to lie down;¹⁹ and it has criminalized squatting in abandoned houses or on unused building sites.²⁰ In this way, places both for “work” – begging – and sleep have been squeezed shut. The city also tightened the control on the use of streets and sidewalks in the busiest parts of the town which have long been central locations for homeless people to beg, hang out (cf. BRIDGE – WATSON 2001; SASSEN 1999), or scavenge (cf. MITCHELL – HEYNEN, 2009). Civil social organizations argue that these restrictions on begging and hanging out violate homeless people’s rights of free action, association, and movement (cf. MITCHELL 1997).

There has been simultaneous pressure in Szeged to move homeless hostels out of the centre, but the geography of social service provision, with services scattered around the city, require homeless people to traverse the centre on their daily paths: they have not been excluded entirely. Namely the ways between the five service points cross the centre and the primary places of visible homeless is downtown (NAGY 2004 and 2009). Thus it is not uncommon to still see shop guards shoeing homeless people away on behalf of owners who see them as disrupting their trade.

In all these aspects, homelessness in Szeged and Hungary, looks more and more like its American counterpart, even if the pathway to this kind of homelessness and its regulation has been different.

Conclusion

In Hungary, homelessness has been produced through special historical-economic-political processes to which policy has responded in piecemeal ways. As the situation continues to change, so does the response – from an initial sympathy for the plight of the homeless in post-socialism to their increasing criminalization. The structural and individual causes of homelessness in Szeged and in Hungary share similarities– the role of alcohol abuse or illness in compounding the structural effects of the economy, but they diverge as well, for example in the the historical role that workers’ hostels played in housing the poor and providing some social stability (at least as long as work lasted), even if they hid poverty in the socialist era. As the local and national Hungarian states adopt neoliberal “best practices” – ranging from reduced welfare spending to anti-panhandling laws – the relationship between social subsidy and individual liability has been reformulated and as a result the plight of the homeless has become even more precarious.

¹⁹ Dome homeless people have responded by tearing the arms off.

²⁰ On the pretext that illegal use causes a fall in property value and is thus a form of stealing.

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