The Political Organisation of People who are Homeless: Reflections of a Sympathetic Sceptic

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Introduction

Any exploration of how poverty and social exclusion might be eradicated, and conversely of how they persist, must come to terms with the question of how people who are themselves poor are to contribute to that eradication. This contribution can be divided into two main themes: the framing of the sorts of solutions that are required and the political momentum that is necessary to put these into action. People coming from a wide range of political and conceptual positions see social movements of the poor (or representative organisations comprising the poor) capable of achieving both these objectives as the ideal manner in which poverty will be eliminated. Organisations that oppose poverty but do not involve participation of the poor at their core are open to the criticism of contributing to deeper impoverishment, not only through proposing the 'wrong' solutions, but also by disempowering those who experience poverty. They run the risk of being characterised as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Experience, however, shows that the poor are unlikely to organise around their interests in any persistent manner, and when they do come together in short-term alliances, the goals they seek to achieve are frequently short term and rarely address the underlying causes of their exclusion (Piven and Cloward, 1979). The conditions which we understand to comprise poverty – lack of resources, social isolation and powerlessness – are deprivations of the very requirements of successful organisation and of long-term thinking. Among the ranks of the poor, homeless people experience the 'lack' of these capacities most extremely and are therefore among the least likely candidates to create a self-representing organisation. This situation makes the emergence of SAND the Danish national organisation for homeless people a welcome and remarkable phenomenon.

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Anker's (2008 and 2009) analysis of SAND as a progressive development overcoming many of these constraints provides the prism for my broader reflections on the timely topic of participation.

Expectations of such representative organisations can be so broad that there is a danger that we may overestimate their potential role when they occur. I believe some of these expectations can be counterproductive to the fight against poverty and social exclusion and harmful to the organisations and the people who comprise them. I argue that the tendency to apply either identity-based or pluralist models of organisation is problematic. When organisations move away from participation in processes and events that are close to the individual and towards 'representation' in broader governance, problems arise that are not always fully addressed. I want to explore this issue both from the perspective of academic research on homeless organisations and other social movements particularly from the United States and from my experience of organisations of the unemployed primarily in Ireland, but also in other European countries (Allen, 1998).

Organisation and Power

Before looking at the difficulties that homeless people experience in establishing and maintaining representative organisations, it is useful to take an overview of the motivations and benefits of such organisations and why they are important.

The most basic motivation for organisations of homeless people is to redress fundamental imbalances of power. Anker presents the situation in the Danish homeless shelters, prior to SAND, as an almost textbook case of a severe power imbalance that can be redressed through organisation. The authorities in the shelters have amassed power from a variety of sources. One of the key dimensions of this power disparity can be described as 'persistence against transience'. Workers in the shelter can draw on not only the long tradition of the shelters but also the power of being full-time workers who are part of a bureaucracy. Shelter authorities, faced with demands from a shelter user, know that even if they cannot dismiss these demands through applications of rules all they have to do is wait. The demanding user will move on and the administration will prevail.

User organisations shift this power balance in two significant ways. First, they create a continuum between the demands of changing individual service users. Demands can no longer simply be ignored until the complainer moves on; changes conceded can be maintained. In this way user organisations can be said to contribute to an equality of persistence. Second, they allow shelter users to draw on resources from beyond the individual in the particular shelter. The shelter user is no longer alone in his or her conflict with the authorities, but can call on the valida-

tion and solidarity of a wider group. Perhaps more significantly, this wider reference shines light upon the exercise of power within the shelter, allowing the standards of dignity and citizenship that apply in wider Danish society to be invoked in an area where – going by Anker's description – they were not commonly found.

If this was all there was to the matter all that would need to be said is that organisations such as SAND promote justice, and perhaps to note that there are other ways of organising shelters that do not generate quite such a disparity of power in the first place. But, of course, the application of rules in the shelter is not the cause of homelessness. One view of homelessness is that it is the result of much greater societal disparities of power. These can be found somewhere in the power relationships that underpin the housing market or more broadly in how society treats people who are vulnerable or just different.

Also, it is not just the powerless who seek to organise, the relatively powerful and the powerful also organise to gain and maintain their power and they tend to be rather better at it! So the simple achievement of having an organisation does nothing to repair these structural disparities.

Anker makes clear that SAND recognises these larger questions and includes addressing them as part of its objectives. But it is in this transition from participation in events in the immediate environment to broader structural questions that the claims and expectations of organisations of homeless people become problematic. Does the particular way that SAND and similar organisations overcome the enormous barriers to organisation create an organisational base capable of tackling these larger questions? Are structures established to impact on what are essentially managerial decisions also capable of engaging in conflicts over resource allocation? And are these necessary or even reasonable questions to be asking of an organisation comprising the most marginalised in our societies?

Resources

Lack of resources is one of the primary barriers facing organisations of homeless people. SAND overcomes this barrier by receiving state resources. To those of us unfamiliar with the tolerances of Danish democracy, this in itself seems unusual and creates a degree of scepticism about what constraints are implicit in this financial support. In Ireland, for instance, it would be quite common for organisations representing poor people or disadvantaged communities to obtain money from the state for one purpose (e.g. employment schemes, community development, policy analysis) and to use it to generate representative structures as a by-product of this work. This source of funding, however, creates constraints, real or self-imposed, on the extent to which these organisations feel able to criticise government policy. Governments

recognise this situation. For example, in 1993 the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) sought support from the incoming Labour Party Minister for Enterprise in order to strengthen the INOU's role in representing the 20 per cent of the labour force who were then unemployed. The Minister's succinct response, 'Why would I pay for a stick to beat me?', sums up the view of every government.

The relationship between receiving state funding and the capacity to challenge inequalities within the state is not straightforward. Research in the US on the impact on homeless organisations of their decision to incorporate as non-profit companies provides an interesting analogy (Cress, 1997). Whether the goals and tactics of the homeless organisations were moderated by the decision to incorporate was highly influenced by the timing and reasons for incorporation. Homeless organisations which had incorporation forced upon them as the outcome of a conflict were often destroyed by it, whereas organisations which had this structure in place from the outset tended to be more moderate in their tactics and 'very unlikely to engage in disruptive tactics'. This is in keeping with SAND's clear characterisation of itself as not a protest movement.

In the US social movement literature, social movements of poor people are generally categorised (if not judged) by their willingness to engage in 'disruptive tactics', and those that are disinclined to do so are characterised in language that implies they are less effective ('moderate') (Snow et al., 2005). However, this is not necessarily applicable in a country where the state is committed to recognising the validity of organisations of the marginalised. This view is supported by the fact that the funding of SAND does not arise from a crisis. It is not a 'pay-off' to discourage further disruptive behaviour and become co-opted. Allocation appears to be a proactive choice by government. Anker argues that the interaction of divergent ideologies which 'favour participation' were important in the emergence of SAND, however, neither of these ideologies can be seen as radical in the context of the structural causes of social exclusion.

Anker's description of the regionalised structure of social services administration in Denmark reveals that central government has responded to its loss of control over local social services by providing funds to create representative organisations that will police standards in those services on its behalf. From this perspective, SAND's scrutiny of standards in shelters (and other responses to homelessness situated at a local level) is not only unthreatening to the central state, but is actually an arm of its administration. The central government is not paying for a stick to beat itself, but rather a stick to beat its local counterparts. The question then arises as to what would be the response of central government if SAND subjected its role in tackling the structural problems underlying homelessness to effective scrutiny?

Transience

The second great barrier to organising homeless people is the generally transitional nature of the condition. Anker tells us that people cannot stay more than six months in the shelters and that SAND uses two strategies to overcome this turnover: retaining the involvement of key activists after they cease to be homeless and employing paid staff. The tactic of maintaining organisational stability by retaining activists who have moved on from the experience of homelessness is almost inevitable in maintaining any form of consistency in such an organisation. However, it has two fairly obvious implications. The first is that it undermines one of the central claims of the organisation that people who are experiencing homelessness understand it best and shifts it to a claim that people who have experienced homelessness *at some time* know best. This inevitably raises the problem of what period of homelessness entitles you to how many years of 'representation'. Are those who wish to continue to speak on behalf of a condition they experienced in the past in any way representative of all those who have not moved through and on? This reinforces the second implication that charismatic individuals may come to dominate the organisation.

In employing staff, SAND travels a route taken by most successful voluntary organisations and therefore faces the same challenges. Essentially it runs the risk of reconstructing within its own organisation the power disparity it seeks to address in the homeless shelters. This is in no way a reflection on the individuals employed by SAND; it is a danger that necessarily emerges in the relationship between full-time staff and a voluntary board – made more acute by the fact that the board comprises people who face all the problems of being homeless. There is now a substantial body of literature discussing these tensions (for an overview, see Salamon and Anhier, 1998). Many homeless organisations founded by non-homeless citizens have also faced these challenges to their initial radical intention as they professionalise.

The INOU responded to this challenge by making its most senior staff post (the general secretary) subject to re-election on a three-year basis. Thus for the period in which I was general secretary whatever authority I held depended less on having experienced unemployment and more on accountability to a broad and open membership. My re-election was contested on two occasions and while an outsider may take the view that the contest was balanced in my favour that is not what it felt like to me at the time. The system was abandoned after I left the post, partly because Ireland was experiencing near full employment and partly because of the difficulty of recruiting senior staff on these conditions.

In some senses, the mechanisms which SAND might adopt to ensure that its original purpose and the primacy of homeless experience are sustained through the appointment of full-time staff will be one of the most important parts of the SAND story.

Social Networks

The third barrier that socially excluded groups face in organising themselves is the absence of a social network – people not only move in and out of homelessness, but tend to move around within and between population centres. In the case of SAND this is overcome by selecting the enforced social network of the homeless hostel as the basis for organisation. The membership is defined by being resident in a shelter and has a range of immediate shared interests arising from this. However, this membership base raises serious challenges when extended to the wider structural goals. In the first place, the membership is representative when dealing with shelter issues, but is lacking when dealing with broader issues. By definition, it does not include rough sleepers and tends not to include non-Danish nationals or women.

Anker (2008: 33-34) states that the 'authority and legitimacy of SAND is precisely contained in the fact that it is driven by people with a lay experience of homelessness'. Basing the claim to legitimacy on 'experience' in this way may delegitimise the organisation when it moves away from the personal experience of its shelter-based membership. This claim also has the effect (intended or unintended) of delegitimising the views of other organisations that advocate on homelessness, which draws attention to the difficulties that a homeless organisation faces in using broader ideas of common identity when moving beyond the localised shared experience of the shelter.

Many of the organisations which have been successful in achieving social progress for excluded groups over the past forty years have been based on the politics of identity and it is tempting to draw on these successes when exploring how an organisation of homeless persons can challenge its circumstance. The women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, black power and disability organisations are the success stories in many countries from the 1960s onwards. These groups use the cement of a unifying celebrated identity, with shared symbols and a common language, to transform their circumstance. Such groups often take a point of common identity which has previously been used to oppress or marginalise them and transform it into a badge of honour. 'Gay pride.' 'Black is beautiful.'

However, models of organisation that depend upon identity as their organising principle are problematic when applied to conditions of powerlessness that are essentially socio-economic, even more so when they relate to extreme socio-economic deprivation. The most widespread dis-empowerment based on socio-economic condition is social class. If being 'working class' was a form of personal identity sufficient to build effective organisations the history of the twentieth century would have been very different. Too much has been written on the difficulty of maintaining class-based organisations to add anything useful here, except to note that while the rhetoric of organisation is based on shared class identity, the

successful practice of trade unions is the shared community of a workplace. Piven and Cloward (1979) argue that trade unions persist as the most successful form of 'poor people's organisation' because they can enforce membership and membership fees. Within the community sector the strongest organisations emerge on the basis of solidarity built around deprived neighbourhoods.

It is important to acknowledge that a number of disempowered groups have had to assert that the objective of public policy should not be to 'assimilate' them into society, but to recognise and accommodate their diversity. For example, in the case of Traveller organisations in Ireland, where, over the past twenty-five years, largely self-organised groups have contested the previous orthodoxy, maintained by well-intentioned non-Travellers, that integration into the settled community was the policy solution for this historically nomadic group. A similar conflict has been fought concerning the approach to the issue of physical disability. Self-organisation led to a transformation in the approach to solving the problems faced by these groups.

On the other hand, homelessness and unemployment are not just problematic organising 'identities' because they are socio-economic conditions but more significantly because they are, or should be, transitory. Furthermore, both are transitory conditions from which the individual wishes to escape, rather than stable identities to be celebrated or sustained. This is a significant assertion and one that has been contested in ways which are relevant to the current discussion. During the early 1990s credence was given to the argument that the then high levels of unemployment were not a result of bad policies or the economic cycle, but rather an historic 'end of work' caused by new technology (Rifkin, 1995). The unemployed as 'unrecognised pioneers of a future workless society' (Waters, 1992) should therefore cease to demand employment and instead seek a Basic Income.

Individuals who held this view became quite common in organisations of the unemployed in a variety of countries, in particular Germany (Federal Republic), the Netherlands and parts of Italy. Some moral authority was given to 'unemployed' people who supported this claim. This shift in the understanding of unemployment had very far-reaching impacts on policy demands, which moved away from issues such as quality training, job creation and fair distribution of work and towards issues of Basic Income and the 'right to be unemployed'. Because they were less likely to find work, and largely came from middle-class backgrounds and were well educated, the voices of the 'end of work-ers' were more frequently heard than the 'jobless' who tended to be working class. Those who had built their sense of self around the identity of 'unemployment' inevitably remained involved for longer and gained greater recognition. One leading member of the European Network of the

Unemployed memorably argued against the goal of full employment on the basis that 'if there was full employment I would have to get a job and would not be able to continue my important work with the unemployed'.

In this case the authenticity of the unemployed voice becomes inauthentic. Those people who speak on behalf of the unemployed (or the homeless) may become untypical of the vast majority who have experienced it and escaped from it.

The Poor and Pluralism

Concern about the need for organisations of marginalised people derives from an underlying attachment to achieving pluralism. In open democratic societies, the outcome of many decisions concerning the allocation of resources depends upon the interplay between organised interest groups. Any section of society that does not have an organisation to defend its rights ends up getting a bad deal. Taken to its logical conclusion, this perspective means that poor people are in part marginalised because they do not have organisations to promote their interests effectively. This is not only true in respect of the conflict of interests between the rich and the poor, but also between different sections of the poor. In the Danish case, Anker (2008) refers to the problem that 'more affluent and powerful groups may easily come to dominate local struggles over priorities and allocation of resources'. Thus, because mentally ill people and elderly people had representative groups, it became important for homeless people to form such a group if they were not to be further neglected.

On the face of it, the desire that people living in poverty should have their own representative groups seems progressive and fair, but this extended free-market pluralism of organisations can also be used to add another reason why the poor are responsible for their own plight. Former British Conservative Party Minister for Employment Norman Tebbit expressed the moral condemnation of the Right when he said of his father, who had been unemployed in the 1930s, 'He didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work.' I remember well that many on the Left during Ireland's mass unemployment of the 1980s were greatly frustrated that the unemployed did *not* riot. The vast majority of poor people neither 'get on their bike' nor 'riot' – leading to moral disapproval from both the Right and the Left. Similarly, Wagner (1993) point out how well-meaning descriptions of homeless people as 'vulnerable victims' by US liberals in the 1980s had the effect of rendering the homeless 'absolved of responsibility for their condition'.

The vast majority of homeless or unemployed people want a place to live or a job. It is simply another imposition for society to add an additional expectation that they should participate in a representative organisation before they get it. We should remember that most settled people decline to participate in a wide range of activi-

ties from voting to trade union membership to residents' associations. One of the strongest claims made for organisations of homeless or unemployed people is that they have a better understanding of the answers. People have a better understanding of their own needs than do bureaucracies, and therefore listening to them results in better services and better outcomes. There is great truth in this, but less truth the further you move away from the immediate personal experience. At the extreme level, there is the fairly obvious point that you do not necessarily have a greater insight into, say, the ideal level of economic stimulus needed to get the best job growth for the least inflation just because you are unemployed. It is not just that a great deal of expertise is required to understand many of the causes that we call 'structural'. If asked, the unemployed person might be more inclined to risk a bit of inflation, but this is an expression of interest not understanding. The problem is that, for the most part, homelessness persists not because of questions of expertise but because of questions of interest.

Take, for instance, a fairly typical basic demand from a homeless service users' group that shelters should not close their doors during the day, throwing people into hours of exposure on the streets. Where this demand is resisted because of the inconvenience it causes staff, the role of the group is clear. It is both asserting the users' preference and improving practice. However, if the change is resisted because of lack of funding, it is more complex. If the group engages in a conflict with the service provider will it undermine the work of the service provider in seeking more support or strengthen its hand? If the group enters into an alliance with the service provider what can it actually do to strengthen the service provider's case?

This brings us back to the issue of mobilisation and protest. The organisational challenges facing homeless people is only one dimension of their weakness, another is their relative lack of capacity to threaten to do things that oblige others to listen to them and distribute resources differently. While knowing some of the answers will bring you so far in counterbalancing these weaknesses, it is only through building alliances that they can be overcome. In this context SAND's 'alliance' with central government can be understood as a way of giving authority to their position when dealing with local municipalities.

Conclusion

The growing attention which homeless organisations are paying to the participation of homeless people in the planning and delivering of services is profoundly welcome. But the models of participation that are adopted, and the expectations that are promoted for them, need to be approached with great caution.

Models based on identity are attractive because of the success of such approaches for many other groups suffering social exclusion in recent decades. However, they run the risk of locking homeless people into states of exclusion rather than contributing to their escape. Furthermore, since most people who become homeless escape from it after a short time, the resultant organisations may not in fact be representative of most people who experience homelessness. This may lead to the advocacy of responses that do not reflect the full range of experiences. Organisations of excluded people are also unlikely to be capable of both framing broader solutions and generating the political momentum to carry them out. Expectations that homeless people will combine to form such organisations are misplaced and can serve to stigmatise the poor further and to absolve broader society of its responsibility to address this form of exclusion.

For organisations of homeless people to have a genuine impact on the structural and distributional causes of homelessness they need to seek allies. Among the most significant of these will be service providers that are committed to the same objectives. This raises challenges for both sides, as the immediate locus of demand for organisations of homeless people must inevitably be inadequacies in provision of services.

Anker likens SAND to a 'trade union', which could imply a characterisation of service providers as 'employers'. If homeless organisations and service providers were to get stuck 'sitting across the table from each other' they would run the risk of undermining the credibility of service providers in seeking structural reform, without generating a new homeless movement capable of taking on that role.

All this suggests that the way forward for both homeless activism and service organisations lies in investment in mechanisms for participation and accountability at every level – from shelter to advocacy and governance. These efforts must not be overwhelmed or undermined by the decision of homeless people to decline to be involved. There is progress to be made in this direction, but there is no transformative wellspring waiting to be tapped. As former US activist for homeless people Tim Harris' (2007) description of his earlier romanticised expectation reminds us:

> These radicalized homeless people, who possessed special knowledge and wisdom borne of their experience in the streets, would eventually so threaten the status quo that concessions would eagerly be made. This movement would at some point be co-opted, but not before significant wins were made in terms of housing, jobs, benefits, etc. This is the sort of thing that occurs when one reads too much social theory in college.

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