

THE HOMELESS QUESTION

CHRISTOPHER HERRING &
ZOLTÁN GLÜCK

We were sitting on the raised flowerbed along the southern perimeter of Liberty Plaza, chatting while we finished our meals. The din of the General Assembly meeting could be heard in the background and Harris was telling me about the punk band he'd been in during the '80s when three men came over and interrupted. "This is the guy I was telling you about, who the police told to come here." Bob, an old-timer I've seen around at a number of marches and OWS events, had been talking with us earlier about being homeless in New York. Now he was back with these two men, one of them apparently from "legal." They were eager to hear Harris's story about how he'd been sleeping uptown, in the same place he'd been sleeping for years, when two police officers woke him up, told him that there had been a complaint, and suggested that he "go down to Zuccotti."

Harris talked about how he knew everyone in the neighborhood and has never caused any trouble, and how it seemed impossible that someone would all of a sudden raise a complaint. The man from legal then interjected: "So, then it's confirmed. The police are actually doing this." There was a pause and then he looked directly at Harris and said sternly: "Go back uptown."

It took a moment to register that this was an act of banishment. The silence was broken by Bob, supplicating awkwardly, "But wait, no, Harris is actually a good guy. Like I was saying..." Harris was quick with a response that dissolved the tension. "I'm not sleeping here." He had been distributing chocolate throughout the day, he said. "The problem with these other homeless people who are coming down here is that they are not contributing."

The conversation now turned to why "contributing" should be the basic criteria for whether the homeless are allowed to stay. The legal attaché waxed political about how freeloaders were bad for the movement, but that homeless who are willing to contribute could be an asset. Then the two men asked Harris if he would make a proposal to the General Assembly summing up their conversation. Harris declined, but they

persuaded him to dictate a message that they could read on his behalf. I was appointed scribe and wrote down his declaration:

If you are not contributing to the movement, then why are you here? If you do not go on marches, why are you here? This is a society of people who have come together to protest. If you are not protesting, why are you here? This is not a place for free food or free cigarettes. If you live in New York, go home. If you are homeless in New York, there are plenty of places to be homeless. Go there. Feel free to visit, maybe even eat some free food, occasionally. But don't stay here. Don't cause trouble. This society gives us enough trouble.

Encounters and conversations like this have been playing out at occupations across the United States. Based on our observations, the general exclusion of the homeless from public life has already begun to take root in the Occupy movement. The political calculus of whether the homeless "deserve" to be a part of the movement threatens to reproduce existing forms of structural violence and exclusion within the heart of the movement.

An Asset or a Risk?

On one side of the equation, the homeless have been portrayed as instrumental allies: bringing numbers to the cause, helping to hold down sparser occupations as winter hardens, sharing tactics about sleeping rough, and proving powerful symbols of the economic system's brutality. More frequently, though, the homeless have been portrayed as a detriment and a risk: diverting energy away from fighting the real issues, exacerbating the problems of cleanliness within the camp, offending the sensibilities of middle-class campers, verbally or physically assaulting passersby and participants, and polluting the image of an orderly protest. These negative representations of a nefarious underclass co-opting the occupations have

made it easier for Occupy's opponents to belittle the movement as vagrant and lawless, putting pressure on municipal authorities to crack down. Indeed, the largest risk seems to lie in this politics of representation, through which municipal governments might convert the question of occupation from a political right of protest to a question of "public health and safety"—the classic premise used against homeless encampments for decades.

Through these representations of the homeless, both in the media and at times within the movement itself, the homeless question has become framed as an informal calculus of the costs and benefits of including or excluding the most brutally impoverished. At this critical moment in the progress of the movement, the homeless question has become a question of exclusion, legitimacy, and belonging.

There is a series of problems involved in conflating the right to camp with a responsibility to contribute. First, the question of "contribution" and demanding proof of support for the cause is discriminatory; it is a burden faced only by those who "appear homeless." Those who can pass for "real protesters" in their dress, disposition, and discussion are considered assets in their mere presence and rarely questioned. Second, it is important to remember that many of the Occupy camps have co-opted public spaces that had long been occupied by the homeless, and in some cases have even displaced these populations. In some cases, the protests have even inadvertently drawn violence toward these rough sleepers. One homeless woman we spoke to in Oakland, who had been sleeping around Oscar Grant Plaza long before the occupation, complained of being tear-gassed and robbed in the wake of a protest. Third, the dichotomy of "contributing" and "freeloading" mirrors the more general divisive distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor.

We must therefore reframe the homeless question beyond the division between those "dissenting" and those "seeking shelter" (as a *New York Times* headline had it). Although some homeless people may be converted to the goals of dissent,

many will not or cannot, and the movement must take special care not to instrumentalize this precarious group. At the same time, opposing the survival goals of the homeless and the political goals of the occupiers has led to discriminatory practices at OWS and elsewhere, such as those of the Zuccotti kitchen staff who were recently embroiled in accusations of discrimination against those who appeared to be "professionally homeless."

The "homeless problem" of OWS is not a problem of the movement, but rather of the economic system at which it is aimed. It is a problem that society ignores or treats through punishment and exclusion, but the movement cannot afford to respond to it in this way. The "homeless question" should be reframed as a question of how dissenters should treat those seeking food and a safe place to sleep. Rather than supporting a politics of exclusion toward the homeless, some occupations have explicitly taken up their cause. The kitchens at Occupy Oakland and Occupy Philadelphia openly aim to feed the city's homeless. In Atlanta, protesters are working to save a shelter that is at risk of shutting down, and in Austin the movement has mobilized to push for more affordable housing and to legalize tent cities for the homeless. These efforts point to what new forms of solidarity and alliance could look like. Although protesters and the homeless may differ in their use of occupied spaces, the movement cannot afford to let this difference mask the more relevant question of why both groups have come to share the same ground.

"Why Are You Here?"

The way Harris used the rhetorical question "Why are you here?" to shame the "undeserving" resonates with the homeless question currently posed both in the media and within parts of the movement itself. It is important for the movement to take Harris's question seriously and to articulate why it is that scores of homeless have flocked to occupations for relief. Why are the homeless at these occupations rather than other

public places? In our discussions with the homeless in New York and Oakland, it became apparent that they are simultaneously being pushed by the state, directed to the park by the police, and pulled in by the failure of miserly welfare policies, preferring to eat in an environment without the demeaning rituals of shelters and soup kitchens.

Jane, an African-American woman in her forties who has only recently become homeless, was staying at a shelter in Richmond until Occupy Oakland set up camp in Frank Ogawa Plaza. Although she complains about the colder weather, she prefers her outdoor campsite to the shelter bed. “That shelter is dangerous, dirty, and the staff treats you like shit. Here, I feel like I have a voice, and people treat you like a real person. I can weather this cold for a bit of dignity.” Jim, a homeless man who has lived on the streets for over a decade and is sympathetic but not contributing to the movement, has been spending more and more time around Oakland’s encampment. “Cops and businesses give you a hard time around this city, telling you to move on. It’s nice to have a space where you don’t feel threatened.”

In this respect, many occupations are incubating a movement to address the punitive practices of banishment against the chronically homeless. These practices are also inherent in what’s left of our degrading welfare provisions, which observe—with parsimonious strictness—distinctions between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. At the same time, those in the movement are understandably concerned that such a strategy might overwhelm the camps’ capacities and, in becoming the primary function of the site, obfuscate a cause whose goals are much broader.

As we move forward, grappling with both immediate and long-term questions about the place of the homeless in this movement, it is essential that we remember the systemic and historical connections that bind us together. That the history of capitalism is also the history of systemic social and economic exclusion. And that today we are all at risk of becoming part of the *relative surplus population*.

Moments of expulsion and economic relegation have occurred in fits and spurts throughout modern history, but they are most acute during periods of general economic crisis. It is therefore to this logic of exclusion and crisis that we should look to in posing the question “Why are you here?” What is important is that the answer actually encompasses both the homeless and the broader OWS movement—both have been brought into existence by economic marginalization, crisis, and expulsion. We must understand that a common logic underlies the mass foreclosures, the expulsion of low- and middle-income earners from their homes, the emergence of an indebted and seemingly economically redundant generation of students, the growth of mass incarceration as a tool for containing impoverished populations, the widespread and growing homelessness of the past forty years, and the racial dynamics that play out in these processes. It is no simple coincidence that street homelessness reemerged in America at the same historical moment that the top one percent began its rapid ascent, in the early 1970s. It is only when we take our common predicament seriously that we can answer the question of why we are here. We each have our own story, but ultimately we have arrived together at this juncture of precariousness, insecurity, and exclusion. This common predicament must become a source of solidarity and a foundation for the difficult task of building a new politics of inclusion.