

The Wrong Kind of Poor

How did Durban's homeless street people come to be in poverty and why does no one seem to respond to their presence or need appropriately?

"Durban Dumps its destitute in Cape Town – Homeless bussed into City"

(Saturday Weekend Argus; 21st August 2004)

"...starve them out: we need to take a conscious and united stand not to feed the beggars and vagrants [maybe this will drive them out]"

(Berea Mail; 23rd February 2001)

The recent developments in central Durban stemming from 'white flight', inner-city decay, gentrification, vice crimes and immigrant enclaves have all been key topics in public debates over the post-apartheid transformation of the city. However, in spite of this the condition of homeless street people and the associated social ills have had little focus directed at them (Waters 2007:197). One exception to this was the relocation of a homeless shelter called The Ark from the Point Waterfront development. Public discussion on the relocation of the Ark revealed national and city level policy uncertainty in relation to this group; a population maligned by other poor and middle to upper-class sectors of the society; and a population whose spokespersons depicted the city's attempts at regeneration as being directly harmful to their livelihood and survival strategies.

These are the adult *beggars, loiterers, sitters, wanderers and foragers* (Waters 2007:198) of the urban landscape. Narayan (2000:74) suggests that poverty of the street homeless is more anonymous than other forms of poverty and that in the light of the range of poverty types that the post-apartheid government and national policy is trying to address this specific form of poverty is often overlooked. The homeless street people have traveled many different paths to arrive on the streets and the heterogeneity of the population makes them an awkward category of poor in the context of post-apartheid poverty intervention. They are not a neatly packaged previously disadvantaged group, some of them were previously advantaged (in terms of law and policy at least). Some are migrants from previously disadvantaged areas, but now they live in urban, developed, previously and still advantaged areas. In a poverty policy framework which can be seen to be concerned with "the greatest good for the greatest number" this niche population in the shadows of our developed centers may well be overlooked. Despite all this and in the face of

seemingly horrific odds they survive through “hustling”, begging and a range of informal economic pursuits.

Research into homelessness is beginning to demonstrate, that like poverty in other forms, homelessness is the result of the “convergence of many factors” (Shlay and Rossi 1992:130). In previous studies (Waters 2007; Roberts 2003) it was evident that many of these individuals were managing to *get by*, as far as food, money and to a degree informal accommodation were concerned, but what remains unanswered is: what is holding them back from *getting ahead*?

At the advent of democracy in 1994 there were extremely high levels of poverty and human insecurity (Carter and May; 2001). This included severe structural problems surrounding the provision of, and access to housing (Goodlad; 1996). These were accompanied by social problems which had their roots in both tangible and intangible aspects of poverty which grew out of the oppressive apartheid policies against the non-white population (Ramphela 1994, Goodlad 1996, May 2000, Carter and May 2001, Wilson and Woolard 2002) Over and above these “obvious” detrimental outcomes of apartheid was the presence of pockets of vulnerable and previously sheltered whites who were not prepared and unable to compete economically in a free and democratic society (Robinson 2004, Teppo 2004).

The results of the 1997 Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) revealed that the poor defined and understood their poverty as including: social alienation, food insecurity, crowded living conditions, use of basic forms of energy, a lack of adequate and secure employment and fragmentation of the family (May 1998, in Woolard 2002). Further, Carter and May (1999, 2001) demonstrated that 60% of poor South African households were caught in a structural post-apartheid poverty trap, and despite the intentions of the RDP and the subsequent GEAR programmes the poor were restrained in their ability to use those few remunerative assets they possessed. This state of affairs was further compounded by the fact that the Social Assistance Act only catered for specific categories of people; 60% of all the poor (11 million people) were not covered or eligible at all for any of the available social grants (Taylor; 2002:31).

Although at the end of apartheid the largest share of poverty was to be found in rural areas, the end of apartheid era influx controls lead to increasing urbanization and an increasing of poor within urban areas (Rogerson; 1999:512, Bhorat and Kanbur; 2005 in Triegaardt). The inability of authorities to respond to the urbanized poor lead to the homeless having to live in appalling conditions (Mohamed; 1997:2). In the City of Durban, existence of “Pavement People” was hardly recognized until the city council warned of a possible typhoid outbreak in 1989. Almost immediately this invisible population received attention, but as a “serious health hazard” (Mohamed; 1997:2). Driven by fear of the outbreak of contagious disease the business sector and residents began to construct this population as public enemy (Mohamed; 1972:2). Just over a decade later when the residents of Albert Park were opposing the relocation of the Ark (A homeless shelter with upwards of 900

residents) to their area this tension and “otherness” was reasserted with the residents being constructed on one side, as “law-abiding citizens” and the homeless street people being constructed in opposition to this; as belonging to “the ‘other world’ of poverty, informality and illegality which strives on the margins of society” (Bouillon 2002:107).

“It is simply impossible to account here for the number of occasions when this wording (clean up) is used, all across the social spectrum, in official, political, press, public and private discourses, which assimilates, explicitly or implicitly, homeless people, hawkers and other informal or ‘illegal’ users of the city, with litter, rubbish or filth”

(Bouillon 2002:114)

The urban homeless are an ever visible but statistically elusive population (Parnell and Mosdell; 2003:1). The statistical elusiveness and anonymity of the urban homeless population makes them an awkward category of poor. The many paths that have brought the urban homeless to their current situation are diverse and the ‘in-group’ heterogeneity of this population (Waters; 2007, Roberts; 2003) further compounds their awkwardness and the apparent difficulty the city and wider society has in coming to terms with their presence and needs. In 1997 the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR) concluded the following;

“From intensive meetings over the past eight months with various relevant departments of the Councils and key figures, it was evident that there are no plans, no vision and no reaction and interaction between the policy-makers, department heads and the homeless community”.

(Mohamed; 1997:3)

The storm around the closing of the Ark shelter and relocation of its 900 residents in 2004 exposed just how ill-equipped/prepared the municipal structures and society are in dealing with homeless street population. (Bouillon (3 cities project), Bamford 2004, Bisetty 2004, Hlongwa 2004, Sookha 2004).

In 2002 there were 25 known night shelters which catered for the homeless street people in Durban. Besides for the Ark which housed 900 inmates most of these could sleep up to 100 residents. Capacity varies according to time of the year; people are more prepared to sleep outside in summer than in winter, and holiday times also see increased occupancy. The majority of these shelters are illegal and established in premises not intended for residential use (Roberts 2003:26, 2007, Waters 2007). Eight years on it is almost certain that many of these have closed down, and new establishments have opened to cater to the demand left in their wake. Despite this and more importantly, however, the car guards, hustlers, beggars and informal entrepreneurs remain.

[Those that] go out every day to hunt for jobs and gather the uncertain elements for survival. The city is their jungle; it is just as alien and as challenging. But their livelihood is based on leftovers: leftover jobs, leftover trades, leftover living space, homes built of leftovers.

(Lomnitz, in Gilbert and Gugler; 1996:93)

This “jungle” is indeed alien to those of us living in the mainstream society with our formal employment and formal obligations; but there is evidence to show that a “streetwise subculture” does exist (Waters; 2007) amongst the population of homeless street people. This “streetwisdom” is a stock of knowledge that allows members of this subculture to maintain themselves indefinitely (albeit in poverty) in Durban with the absence of any formal employment or residential stability (Waters; 2007:210). Once again the disjunction between this group and powers that be becomes obvious in the face of the effects urban renewal has on this groups precarious survival strategies (Waters; 2007:212, 2008 unpublished). This sentiment was captured emotively by the former head of the Ark,

“The eThekweni Municipality had scant regard for the city’s ‘tramps and outies’... The municipality’s ambitious iTrump initiative, established to clean up and regenerate Durban, was another sad factor in the lives of the destitute... They should rather call it iTramp”.

(in Bisetty 2004)

Much of the antagonism against the homeless street people, and lack of focused recognition of this social problem, is born out of the belief that the “vagrants” and “beggars” are qualitatively lacking, insufficient or plain lazy; and that the root cause to their perceived lowly position in society can be found in their own unwillingness to improve their lives. For many it has been and is still “considered a person’s own weakness if he could not ‘lift himself up by his own shoe-laces’” (Teppo; 2004:53). This appraisal and approach to the problem ignores the existence of conditions, structures and agents which may make it very difficult or even impossible for an impoverished person to ‘lift himself up by his own shoe-laces’. An appreciation of the more intangible mechanisms of poverty is required.

Those who view the poor as being responsible for their own circumstances would happily content themselves in the knowledge that the poor need simply employ their human capital more productively to slowly acquire more economic capital which in time will allow them raise their standard of living and pave their own path out of poverty. This is an overly simplistic model which takes no account of other forms of capital; namely *social capital* and *symbolic capital*.

Social capital underpins the fact that social networks have value. Social networks give rise to norms of reciprocity and trust (Putnam; 2000:19); and it is this trust and reciprocity which stimulates the flow of capital between individuals in the network. Some networks are exclusive with focus on “in-group” capital flows; these networks are rich in *bonding* social capital. Bonding social capital, apart from reinforcing exclusive identities and homogenous groups, helps members of these closed groups *get by* in terms of assistance in times of distress and need. *Bridging* social capital on the other hand is characterised as being outward looking and can link individuals across “diverse social cleavages” (Putnam; 2000:22). An important distinction between the two is that *bridging* social capital is what helps individuals get ahead.

To explain this better Putnam (2000:22) draws on economic sociologist, Mark Granovetter’s observation that;

“weak ties that link [an individual] to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from [theirs] are actually more valuable than strong ties that link [that individual] to relatives and friends whose sociological niche is very like [their] own.”

For the purposes of this study this is enlightening in that it reveals that even though many homeless people may dwell among friends and have many social contacts the social milieu in which they live affords very little opportunity to forge bridging links to resource-rich networks (La Gory et al; 191:213).

In order to bolster the above concept and secure it within the phalanx of concepts which serve to inform us how phenomena beyond the individuals control can perpetuate poverty one needs to understand what prevents the poor from making contacts outside their specific social milieu, and from coming into contact with “distant acquaintances who move in different circles”. The concepts below conceptualise social distance as well as the mechanisms which frustrate or retard attempts to overcome that distance.

The relational perspective is a good starting point for contextualising social distance in the city. This perspective is based on the ability to appreciate the city as a space which is made up of diverse webs of social, cultural and economic relations (Allen et al; 1999:14), furthermore although the city presents a high concentration of diverse relational webs, superimposed and juxtaposed in a given physical space it is a given that not all of these relational webs are connected, and so, although the city presents a physical proximity for the various actors it can equally present “distance” and complete disconnection between the relational webs of the actors (Allen et al; 1999:15) (Simmel in Wirth; 1938:14). Although the urban street homeless may find themselves surrounded by formal and

informal income earning activities social distance negates the opportunities provided by physical proximity.

For Walter (1973:239) the experience of poverty is not only generated by the absence of wealth, but by the presence of *illth*. *Illth* includes all those sociocultural processes which exclude and dissociate the poor from the rest of society. The vulnerability which stems from *illth* can be seen to be linked to Goffman's ideas of 'mortification' as well as shifts in what Goffman would call the individual's 'moral career' (Goffman; 1991:24). The individual's 'moral career', is composed of the evolving changes that befall the individual's beliefs regarding himself and others; the changes brought about by change in one's objective and subjective social position over time; for instance the moving into and out of different degrees of impoverishment. Goffman (1991) discusses mortification in the context of the changing moral careers of inmates on their entrance to total institutions. The mechanisms of contaminative exposure and the curtailment of self presentation which these inmates experience can be readily applied to those who find themselves in poverty; and as such is a useful concept for this study. Mortification refers to the "series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self" (Goffman; 1991:25) suffered by the individual. These include; *role dispossession* (Goffman; 1991:24); *personal defacement* (Goffman; 1991:29), the adoption of poses, stances and movements which are deemed as demeaning by the particular society (Goffman; 1991:29), and *disculturation* (Goffman; 1991:23, see also Miller; 1997:578). All of these can act as mechanism which create and maintain the symbolic barriers which separate an individual from the wider society and certain social networks.

The above concepts are useful when arguing against those who place the blame for persistent poverty squarely on the shoulders of the poor because they expose and give form to subtle social mechanisms that can serve as obstacles to lifting oneself out of poverty. Most of the above concepts and theories are enriched when looking at Bourdieu's *generative structuralism* (Harker et al 1990). Here Bourdieu marshals concepts not entirely different from the relational perspective, moral career and mortification within a context of how they all relate to different forms of capital and practice.

Bourdieu's notion of social space conceives social reality as a space. This space will contain multiple relational webs, or for Bourdieu, multiple *fields*, which will or won't have some relationship with each other, and points of contact. It is important to mention here that capital is the essence of the field, for without a specific capital a field has no meaning (Harker et al; 1990:13). The social space of an individual is linked to multiple fields over time. This dynamic sense of moving through different fields is what Bourdieu terms *life trajectory* (Harker et al; 1990:9). The dynamism captured through the concept of life trajectory makes it a good companion concept for Goffman's concept of moral career.

Bourdieu's concept of field might be a more fruitful one than relational web, because the concept of field allows us to identify specific kinds of relation, defined by the specific form of capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic) which gives the field meaning.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* can lead to a deeper understanding of the processes of mortification. Habitus must be understood as an individual's repertoire of dispositions; and these dispositions have been created and are constantly reformulated through interaction with objective structures as well as their personal history (Harker et al; 1990:10). Dispositions can be created or reformulated through an individual's subjective adjustment to their social position within a given field (Harker et al; 1990:10). Habitus becomes the basis for friendship, love and other personal relationships, but also the basis for constructing theoretical classes into groups (Harker et al; 1990:10).

Habitus is also closely linked to 'capital' in that the habitus of the dominant social and cultural cliques (for example) can act as multipliers of other kinds of capital, and "in fact constitute a form of symbolic capital in and of themselves" (Harker et al; 1990:12), through such forms as language, dress code and posture (Harker et al; 1990:5). If one's habitus can influence symbolic capital it is clear to see how mortification brought on through poverty can decrease one's stock of symbolic capital and removes one's legitimacy and power to represent themselves in the social world.

Importantly habitus acts on a subliminal level;

"The schemes of the habitus... function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of the introspective scrutiny or control by the will. Orienting practices practically, in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body – ways of walking or blowing one's nose, ways of eating or talking – and engage the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world, those which most directly express the division of labour... or the division of the work of domination."

(Bourdieu 1984:466 in Harker et al; 1990:11).

To put the above excerpt into different words;

"Poor people must meet their poverty face to face twenty four hours a day, every day, all the year around. The way they dress, the way they walk, the way they prepare their

food, the way they fill their children with hope or hopelessness – all reflect the iron laws of poverty.”

(Oyen et al, 1996:16).

These “iron laws” create the social and symbolic obstacles that hinder the homeless street people in their efforts to “lift themselves up by their own shoe laces”. Their “otherness” (in relation to mainstream ‘polite’ society) coupled with mainstream society’s fear of contaminative exposure does little to aid this population in securing access to bridging social capital. How many of your friends heard about an opportunity through someone they know? Or to illustrate differently; how valuable has your membership in diverse social networks been to you?

Beyond the antagonism directed towards the homeless street people by the rest of society the apparent neglect of this population by the government needs to be better examined and understood. Our democratic government touts equality and opportunities for all along with the eradication poverty, but it becomes clear that there are different kinds of poor. Within the context of post-apartheid poverty eradication programmes, perhaps the homeless street people are simply the wrong kind of poor to benefit from the government’s programmes and attention.

The idea of *deserving poor* draws distinction between those who are poor through no fault of their own and despite their best efforts, and those “immoral fellow sufferers who really merited poverty” (Halper; 1973:71). Historically discussions of the deserving poor revolved around the sick, abandoned, the widowed and the elderly (Schen; 2000:450) while the *undeserving poor* referred to all those able bodied “vagrants” who made illegitimate claims on different communities’ charity. Yet it becomes apparent that this distinction is not that clear cut, and is very much coloured by dominant ideologies at a given time in a given society (Schen; 2000). In a system that is redressing ills against previously disadvantaged people and places do the urban poor slip through the cracks? The following excerpt is taken from a documentary on poor whites and it is revealing in the context of this discussion of urban poverty. The quote is from former Minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad.

ESSOP PAHAD: ... and you're sitting here and worried about whites. I mean no, man sorry. Sorry. Our real fundamental concerns must be the millions of our people who are living under conditions of poverty and under development and they are Africans... living in rural areas, living in the townships. You're sitting here and all your questions is (sic) about the whites. Sorry... I don't find it acceptable.

(Foreign Correspondent, 2006)

Baring in mind this Australian produced documentary was entitled “Poor Whites”; and never pretended to be addressing South African poverty generally the fact that Minister Pahad later accuses the interviewer of asking politically incorrect questions startlingly betrays the existence of notions surrounding deserving and undeserving poor. Less explicitly telling from the above excerpt is the focus on rural and under-developed locations. What about the poor urban homeless, of all creeds, colours and ages, living in the shadows of our developed urban areas?

The sense this excerpt leaves one with is that the government’s focus is on “the greatest good for the greatest number”. If this is the case there will be some who will be overlooked and neglected through this approach. But this leaves a space that calls for the serious engagement of civil society and the non-state development sector. In a country with an ever increasing rate of urbanisation this is not a social phenomenon that can be relegated to the shadows and sidelines indeterminably. Without distracting from the very real plight of the ‘greatest number’ it needs to be recognised that poverty has many faces; and that *need* is not proportional to distance from centres of affluence. Without this recognition the wrong kind of poor will slip through the cracks.

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