

Homelessness and the House of Lies

Dr John Falzon

I remember learning an important lesson
From a young woman experiencing homelessness in Melbourne.
Everyone was walking past her, refusing to meet her eyes.
She wasn't asking for somewhere to live.
She wasn't even asking for something to live on.
All she was asking for was just enough to buy some breakfast.
But everyone just kept walking past
and the angrier she got the wider
the berth they gave her and the faster they moved past her.

*I've been here since five this morning, she said.
I just want some coffee and something to eat.
And then she said:
I didn't choose this life, you know.*

In this simple utterance,
She summed up so much of what is wrong
With the way homelessness is defined
In the guts of the neoliberal nightmare.

I didn't choose this life, you know.

Neoliberalism is presented by its purveyors
As the bringer of unmatched goodies,
So many that it is impossible to choose from.
Neoliberalism is pitched by its champions

As the defender of freedom,
Especially this sacred freedom to choose
From amongst all these goodies.

It is sold, not as a political programme
Or an economic policy.
It is sold as the only way of being,
The only way of being alive,
The only way of being part of the team,
And it goes without saying, paraphrasing the prime minister
How good is it to be part of the team!

Neoliberalism is sold, in short, as a solution to the problems it causes.
It's not so much that it asks you to sell your soul
Because it does not rate your soul so highly.
It does something far more destructive to your humanity.
More lasting and more lingering.
Neoliberalism sells you
A soul.

The price you pay
Is one of religious devotion to the economy,
Which is code for the interests of those
In whose hands lie the bulk of the concentrated wealth
And hence the concentrated power.

Our problem, therefore, lies in the displacement of democracy
By this neoliberal notion of the economy,
A notion that actually veils the concrete economic conditions
That are not of our choosing
But that are by no means inevitable.

As the Italian theorist Domenico Losurdo puts it:

Democracy cannot be defined by extracting the fate of the excluded.

Democracy, in the neoliberal playbook, ceases to matter,
Except when invoked in the actual battle against
The broadest possible social, economic, cultural,
industrial and political democracy.

As democracy is displaced
Markets matter,
Profits matter,
But people,
Except where they are of use as consumers and disposable human capital,
Do not matter.

This means accepting the ravages of unemployment, underemployment,
The housing crisis, wage stagnation,
The stripping of workers' rights through the smashing of unions,
The ripping-up of the social security system
To such a degree that it evolves into a social insecurity system,
The selling off, the shutting down, the running down,
the privatisation, corporatisation, and marketisation of the public sphere.
It means accepting the wisdom that
cutting taxes for corporations and high wealth individuals
Is good for everyone
Even as social expenditure is reduced
And even though it is patently clear
That the wealth is never going to trickle down.

As political theorist, Wendy Brown, explains:

*Neoliberalism...is best understood... as a governing rationality
that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life...
Neoliberalism thus does not merely privatise...
what was formerly publicly supported and valued.*

*Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere,
in terms of capital investment and appreciation,
including and especially humans themselves.*

In this house of lies,
Which trumpets choice
Whilst actually restricting choice,
When it comes to the essentials of life,
It is little wonder that the young woman experiencing homelessness
Should need to speak the simple truth
That drowns out the lies told about her:
I didn't choose this life, you know.

If she is insecurely employed,
If a chunk of her wages are systematically stolen,
The dominant discourse assures her
It is because this is what she has chosen.

If she is locked out of the labour market
And locked into unemployment,
If she is locked out from the housing market
And locked into homelessness,
It is because this is what she has chosen.

If she is eventually sucked into the vortex of incarceration

Which comes with the pathologisation and criminalisation of poverty,
Despite the fact that, as Angela Davis writes,
Prisons do not disappear problems. Prisons disappear human beings.
It is because this is what she has chosen.

But nobody chooses this.

And nobody chooses the life
That neoliberalism has carved out for us
Except the few to whom its untold benefits accrue.

And yet, in the neoliberal narrative,
She is the problem.
She is the problem of her own making.
The absurd proposition is that
She made her own absence of a bed
And so she has to lie in it.

Before we even talk about homelessness as a problem,
Let alone the people experiencing homelessness as the problem,
We need to ask:
What is a problem?
The word, of course, has its origins in the ancient Greek,
pro-ballein, to throw before.

How we see a problem
All boils down to who defines the problem,
Who throws it before us,
And who it is thrown before.

I think you will agree that in neoliberal discourse

Homelessness is not defined by the people who know the most about it,
The people experiencing homelessness themselves.
And furthermore, it is not only thrown down
By people who are not experiencing
and who have never experienced homelessness.
It is thrown before people who have never experienced homelessness.

If you keep on accumulating lies, whether or not they are intentional,
about who or what the problem is,
you do not end up building a more equitable society
in which housing is enjoyed by all as a human right
instead of by some as a speculative sport.
Instead, you end up building extensions on the house of lies.

At best, people experiencing homelessness
Are told that what they need is tough love,
Which supposedly lies somewhere between correction and coercion.
At worst, they are told that they have only themselves to blame
and that virtually any assistance
will only harm their chances of getting up
and standing on their own two feet,
fixing the mess they have gotten themselves into.
Witness the recent renewed attacks on unemployed workers
as the federal government continues to resist the calls
for a desperately needed increase to Newstart.

Let's also take the recent comments on homelessness
By Federal Assistant Minister Howarth on Radio National:
I want to put a positive spin on it as well
He said,
and not just say Australia's in a housing crisis

when it affects a very, very small percentage of the population.

When you define a problem you also get to define its solution, based on how you define its parameters.

The Minister had some interesting things to say about how he defined the problem in this case:

There are a number of areas and I'll be focusing on all of them, but I think people on the street is important because that's what Australians see if they're in a capital city. They can see people on the street - they want something done about that.

It is a common trope that sees homelessness in terms of its visibility and the discomfort that “people on the street” cause for “Australians” (the “us” he is talking to).

In other words, “we” are being subjected to the problematic spectacle of homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness are themselves defined as “our” problem.

The solution, according to this discourse, lies not in addressing the causes of homelessness, and certainly not in providing the socio-political space for the people experiencing homelessness to define what the real problem is.

Rather, the solution lies in lessening its visibility, clearing the streets of people who are made to feel residual and removable, because they have, according to this rationality, chosen a terrible life.

What Australia needs, in this ideological fantasy, is not the provision of housing but the consignment of the condemned to the house of lies.

The great poet and theorist, Audre Lorde reminds us that

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle

because we do not live single-issue lives....

Our battles, therefore, are inseparable.

And yet just as unity in diversity is the greatest weapon of the oppressed,
Division through demonisation is the highly effective weapon of the oppressor.

Homelessness is a symptom of the deep inequality

We appear to be growing accustomed to.

You can get used to anything,

But the more we get used to inequality

The more divided we become

And the more we lose of our collective soul,

The more we lose of the public sphere

Which the champions of inequality hate so much

Precisely because it reeks to them of democracy.

'What is neoliberalism?'

asks French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

*'It is a programme for destroying collective structures
which may impede the pure market logic.'*

The very fact that homelessness is hived off

as if it were a separate category of human existence,

As if it were outside the norms of market attachment

Is testimony to the effectiveness of this tactic.

Of course it is necessary to study and analyse the concrete conditions

Which give rise to, and characterise, the experience of homelessness.

But these conditions are manifold and profoundly interconnected,

And, while they intersect in unique ways in every personal narrative,

It is easy to fall into the trap set out by the dominant discourse when we

Attribute these conditions to the person experiencing them,
As if they had brought them into the world
And as if, through a metonymic sleight of hand,
They embodied all that they had come into contact with,
All that social and economic insecurity
We fear,

All the trauma
That terrifies us
As it touches us
Or dances around us.

For, yes, homelessness is a trauma.
It is, as per its original meaning,
A wound.

And we can only, in John Berger's beautiful formulation,
Speak to the immediate wound,
When we understand it to be, not only a personal wound,
But a social wound,
Or, as in the revolutionary insight of the feminist movement,
When we accept,
That *the personal is political.*

Being displaced, being devalued, being residualised and relegated,
Are experiences that come together in the phenomenon of homelessness

Homelessness does not occur in a socio-political vacuum.
It is a trend that has deep roots in the realities
of class, gender, race, disability, age, sexuality,
and all the manifestations of exclusion and control.

It happens against a triple backdrop of colonisation
With its dispossession, exclusion and accelerated incarceration
Of First Nations Peoples,

Patriarchy,
With its cultural, institutional and economic apparatus of
Violence towards, and relegation of, women,
And neoliberal capitalism,
With its financialisation of the housing market,
And devaluation of people who need a place to call home.

If we are to speak to the social wound of homelessness
We must doggedly resist
Its fictitious separation from these cumulative trajectories.

It is not poverty that causes homelessness.
It's wealth, especially speculative wealth
concentrated in the hands of the few,
constraining the choices of the many.

AHURI estimates that Australia needs 727,300 new social housing properties
over the next 20 years to meet the current shortfall and address rising need.

The neoliberal myth
is that the market is the guaranteed vehicle for the delivery of choice.
As evidenced in Finland,
the only country in Europe
in which homelessness declined over the past decade,
It is the role of government
to deliver what the market cannot,

namely equitable access to the essentials of life,
even within the context of a market-based economy.

Homelessness is not an indicator of bad personal choices
leading to the personal tragedy of poverty.

Homelessness is an indicator of
bad political choices leading to the manufacture of inequality.

Without a place to call home it is nigh impossible
to get a job, keep a job,
go to school, university or TAFE,
or take care of your health.

As the beautiful Irish proverb reminds us:

It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

If any of us is without shelter,
it is because the rest of us,
through our political choices as a society,
have failed them.

Thinking critically about the causes of homelessness and inequality is crucial.

But acting collectively to build the kind of society

where we really are a shelter to each other;

this is the key to making a concrete difference.

This is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.

I would like to conclude

With the beautiful words of Lilla Watson

And a group of First Nations activists in Queensland in the 1970s:

If you have come to help me

*You are wasting your time.
But if you have come
Because your liberation
Is bound up with mine,
Then let us work together.*