Begging in Geneva in Times of Crisis: Multi-layered Representations of Beggars, Begging and Cohabitation in the Public Space

Giada de Coulon, Caroline Reynaud and Annamaria Colombo Wiget

School of Social Work Fribourg, University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland, Switzerland

❯ **Abstract_** *This paper presents results from the first part of a study on representations of various actors concerned by the prohibition of begging in the Canton of Geneva, Switzerland. Parliamentary debates on the passing of this legislation were scrutinized in order to understand how this public space management strategy has been legitimized in political terms. Three different types have been identified among the discourses of Geneva High Council Members: the populist, the humanist and the legalistic. Although these discourses may seem to be opposed, it is interesting to note that commonalities exist between the three positions and that they reveal general representations of what public space-sharing means today. Our analysis shows that the prohibition of begging stems from representations of an elaborate image of foreign beggars – visible, ever more numerous and acting in groups – that seems to be shared by Council members from different parties. Such representations, based on a normative categorization of these marginalized populations, contribute to their being treated differently.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Begging, representations, public space, Switzerland, foreigners*

Introduction

Crystalizing fears in periods of economic and social change, beggars and vagrants have always been a focus for laws regulating those deemed deviant (Damon, 2007). Depicted as representing instability and a lack of control, these social archetypes of poverty are perceived as threatening the regulation of the State. As outlined by Rullac (2008), these ancient figures of poverty raise questions about society because they depend on it for their subsistence. They call on society's responsibility towards a part of itself. Questions such as these raise the issue of social identity, and the responses given by society reveal social choices on moral, religious and political levels. Indeed, even though beggars have been figures in (and have contributed to) the public space through the ages, legislation concerning their presence and their practices has not always been regulated in the same way in all places. Beggars are characterized by their practice of asking for money without providing any formal service, but they are not necessarily homeless people.

Some European cities chose to regulate the authorization of begging according to specific places and times. One recent example is the Belgian city of Charlerois, where beggars are tolerated only in the city centre and may not carry out their activities on Sundays. Many French cities have similar rules; for example, from 2013 in the town of Bagnères-de-Bigorre, in summer time, people are only allowed to beg between 1 and 2 PM.[1] Since February 2013 in Lausanne, Switzerland, begging has been forbidden on public transport, in markets, squares and cemeteries and at less than five meters from any cash dispenser. Other regulations concern the way begging is carried out, the most often criminalized being when it is aggressive, in groups or with children. In several European countries, this last type of regulation is nevertheless more often seen in national legislation than in local contexts. Finally, some specific contexts simply prohibit all forms of begging, as is actually the case in Geneva – the focus of this article.

This article is based on the first part of a qualitative study carried out in Geneva over twelve months in 2013/2014.[2] For the study as a whole, we were firstly concerned with how this aspect of public space management has been legitimized in political terms and, secondly, with the effect it has on begging, and begging practices. In order to answer these questions, we first analysed parliamentary debates in Geneva. The second part involved qualitative interviews with people who beg in Geneva,

1　Erard, L. (03.07.2013) Les 'mancheurs' de Charleroi devront se délocaliser tous les jours, *Tribune de Genève* [on-line]. Available from: http://www.tdg.ch/monde/europe/mancheurs-charleroi-devront-delocaliser-jours/story/16536237 [19.12.2014]

2　Colombo Wiget, A., Reynaud, C. and de Coulon, G. (2013-2015) *L'adoption de la loi anti-mendicité à Genève: une mesure de gestion de la cohabitation urbaine. Représentations des acteurs concernés*, Research financed by the RECSS, one of the former research networks of the Social Work domain of the HES-SO.

despite it being a prohibited activity. The idea is to understand the representations of the different actors concerned as to how and by whom public space is used. Social representations demonstrate the symbolic processes present in social relationships. They constitute principles engendering specific stances (Doise, 1990). We propose to analyse the prohibition of begging as a way of regulating how public space is shared, by deterring a marginalized population from coming to stay in the city. Several authors have shown that, in the current context of globalization, the appropriation of space by homeless people and other marginalized populations is seen as an obstacle to the development of city centres, which must be 'positioned' in the 'city market place' through the 'selling' of images of themselves, as part of a process known as 'city branding' (Rosemberg, 2000; Intartaglia, 2010; Mager and Matthey, 2010; Noisette et Vallérugo, 2010). Economic pressure tends to lead to the privatisation of public space, which is considered a consumer space for goods, entertainment and services (Ghorra-Gobin, 2000; Parazelli, 2009; Perraton and Bonenfant, 2009), and a number of studies have showed that socio-spatial and judicial measures are increasingly being used to disperse, evacuate or expulse marginal populations living in public and semi-public spaces (Doherty *et al.*, 2008). Leresche (1998) shows that Switzerland has not escaped from this fragmentation process and the territorial dissociation linked to globalization.

The aim of this article is to describe what representations of begging practices tell us about issues related to the sharing of public space with marginalized populations. The position of the Canton of Geneva prior to creating new legislation to prohibit begging is examined. Indeed, the law prohibiting begging in Geneva gave rise to rich parliamentary debates at the communal and cantonal level, which form the core of our analysis. This methodology was chosen because, first, as a similar study also shows (Tabin and Knüsel, 2014), the arguments expressed by politicians constitute a rich database from which to access what underpins the positions of politicians. As Rosemberg (2000, p.2) puts it: "Actors that produce [or regulate] space, to produce [or regulate] it, talk about it. This discourse, because it carries representations and geographical views of actors acting in the project, because it highlights importance given to representations, can't be ignored if we want to understand how they 'manage' to produce [or regulate] this space". Unlike data collected through interviews, this type of material has the advantage of demonstrating change in how a problem is represented over time.

As a supplement to the use of parliamentary debates, a review of Swiss media (articles, as well as readers' letters to the editors) on the subject showed that even though an anti-begging law was adopted in 2007, this political choice did not win unanimous support among all those concerned – only very few politicians took public positions and engaged in public discourse. This law, representing a specific view of begging and the regulation of public space, has been the subject of an

appeal at the Swiss Federal Court, brought by the Mesemrom association.[3] However, in its decision of May 9, 2008, the Federal Court confirmed the prohibition of begging in Geneva. While this association is not the only one to denounce a process of 'poverty punishment', few express it publicly.

The article is organised in four different sections. Following a rapid overview of European regulations on begging practices, we present the specificities of the Geneva case study and the data resulting from it. A short presentation of the methodology used to analyse the data follows. The remainder of the article presents the results. We have distinguished three different types of positions, which we have termed the populist, humanist and legalistic discourses. These types represent Weberian idealistic positions, intended to depict the main tendencies identified in analysing the political discourses. The last part of the article summarizes the principal findings and reflects on the new social understanding developed through the analysis. Finally, a short conclusion serves to reflect on the main interests of the study.

National and International Regulation: How Public Space is Becoming Sanitized by Local Authorities

Concerning the regulation of begging practices, three levels of legislation can be distinguished at the European level. Firstly, although the European Union has not officially formulated ordinances on begging practices, it is worth mentioning the EU Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims. According to this Directive, forced begging should be understood as a form of forced labour and therefore fall under the criminal practice of trafficking in human beings. In addition, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms is often used by State Parties, including EU Member States, to equate begging with human trafficking (article 4), as many beggars are victims of organised criminal networks. On this basis, many countries have prohibited organized begging. Secondly, EU Member States, including France, Ireland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Germany and Great Britain have national legislation that prohibits group or aggressive begging. It is interesting to observe that no country prohibits begging *per se*, but rather forms of it that supposedly lead to human exploitation. Thirdly, as suggested above, almost all major European cities have some form of restriction on begging, with a number, like the Canton of Geneva, prohibiting all kinds of begging. Most of them make use of measures of differing degrees of intensity aimed at deterring begging. Three types of measures can be

---

[3] Mesemrom (www.mesemrom.org) was created in June 2007 in reaction to the intense politicisation of the conflation of begging practices and the presence of the Roma community. It aims to protect the rights of Roma.

distinguished: legislative prohibition, land settlements (such as the remodelling of public parks or street refitting to enhance mobility, for example) and the use of technical devices. This overview of the various ways of legislating on begging is a reminder of the fact that the phenomenon is more present and visible in urban areas. Tabin and Knüsel (2014) show, indeed, how since the end of the Middle Ages, socio-economic changes and consecutive migratory moves have contributed to the creation of a population of urban poor differentiated from traditional vagrants by the fact that they lack charitable status. Because of the lack of opportunity to farm in cities, this new category has had to develop strategies in order to get money to buy goods. At present, European cities tend to favour the broad prohibition of begging rather than other legislative measures, as Potts and Martin (2013) mention explicitly with reference to homeless people in Belgium.

In Switzerland (which is not member of the European Union but maintains strong bilateral agreements with it), Geneva is the first French-speaking canton to have re-opened the debate on begging and to have recently passed legislation in this area, although land settlement measures aimed at discouraging begging can also be observed in many Swiss cities. A review of Swiss legislation at the three political levels (federal, cantonal and municipal) shows that while the Federal Penal Code does not explicitly refer to begging, 9 of the 26 cantons forbade begging in the first decade of this century, introducing anti-begging laws at cantonal or municipal level (or extended or adapted existing laws or articles). Indeed, the Swiss political system – a federal directorial democratic republic – allows its 26 cantons a high degree of political autonomy.

This rapid cross-cutting description enables us to document how representations of begging have evolved. Indeed, although core representations of begging exist and seem to remain quite unchanged across time (Bertrand, 2003), some may be more fluid and sensitive to daily context and to differences between individuals (Fraysse, 2000). Damon (2007) documented the transition from a penal issue to a social issue in the sixties and seventies in France, as the perception of homeless people evolved from assisted beggars to persons who should be rehabilitated. Homeless people were perceived at that time as disorganized and irrational, but friendly. However, the most recent trend in the European context is a return to the criminalization of begging practices. Criminalization is understood here as: "the use of laws and practices to restrict the activities and movements of people who are homeless, often with the outcome being fines and/or incarceration" (Fernàndez Evangelista and Jones, 2013, p.16).

Nevertheless, as normative and contemporary ethical issues call into question the legitimacy of punishing the poor, political discourses focus on practices that are presented as deviant. Recent legislation in Europe criminalises certain forms of

begging; it often alludes to 'simple' begging, which may be tolerated, as opposed to 'organized' and/or 'aggressive' begging, which is not. Indeed analysis shows that begging is often directly associated with deviant, morally reprehensible practices. Beggars are thus often depicted either as victims of human trafficking ('organized' begging) or as strategic and perfidious actors when their attitude is judged too enterprising ('aggressive' begging). The recent tendency towards making the public space secure seems key to understanding the phenomenon, and also applies to other marginalized groups; "the notion of 'security' in a more general sense is frequently invoked by city governments and other agencies as justification for the implementation of restrictions on the use of public space" (Doherty *et al.*, 2008, p.293). As a corollary, the notion of insecurity is often used by politicians seeking to restrict the use of public space by marginalized groups. Sanders (2007) identifies a similar process of criminalization of prostitutes in the United Kingdom, as does von Mahs (2005) in Berlin and Los Angeles. This tendency may be associated with the contemporary tendency towards a 'sanitizing of public space' (Amster, 2003). As the following section will show, all of these recent trends that have developed to regulate public space are also present in Geneva.

What Makes Geneva an interesting Case Study?

In 2007, in Geneva, the introduction of the new cantonal Penal Code entailed legal modifications, which caused journalists to question the validity of the prohibition against begging. In response to public demand, the State Councillor for Institutions declared, during a television interview in June 2007, that begging must be permitted because legal instruments could no longer be used to forbid it. Indeed, begging had previously been prohibited in the 1941 Penal Code, but since the new Penal Code was introduced in January 2007, there was doubt about whether or not begging could be prohibited and a public debate ensued. For a few months, begging was once again tolerated; however, this was short-lived. In reaction to the declaration of the State Councillor, two draft bills were brought before the Geneva High Council by right-wing parties, which at that time represented the majority in the Council. In June 2007, the first one was explicitly to allow the prohibition against begging to be reinstated, while the second, in September 2007, detailed various types of punishable social incivilities – along with soiling and damage to public property, begging was added to the list.

In the first draft bill, council members referred to a feeling of insecurity among the city's population with regard to the rising numbers of foreign beggars acting in groups. A number of factors are likely to account for the perceived upsurge in beggars, including the coming into effect of the first agreements on the free movement of persons (FMP), the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the

European Union in January 2007, and the suppression of the visa obligation between Switzerland and Bulgaria and Romania since 2004.[4] There are no clear figures on the actual increase in foreigners begging in Geneva, but the representations by politicians that were analysed converge on a tangible and rapid increase in the so-called Roma population[5] in Geneva that threatened the use of public space. Nowadays, the only numbers available are those that are collected by the police.[6] A police report prepared at the request of the government of Geneva in October 2007 stated that 92 percent of beggars that had been arrested came from Romania or Slovakia. In a period of one week, the police carried out 328 checks on beggars, of which a small majority (184) were men. Most of them were approached while begging and were found to be behaving 'correctly'; only 45 were described as disabled. The average age was between 25 and 40. The State's intention in counting and classifying beggars at this point was to act on the issue of begging without formally prohibiting it. Indeed the government, together with the city authorities, planned a number of concrete initiatives to contain the use of public space by the targeted populations – that is, principally the Roma community; these included evacuating camps, promoting community policing and promoting public structures for emergency help. Some politicians criticised the allusion to the insecurity that was allegedly being created by foreign beggars, accusing the groups initiating the prohibition of creating that insecurity through a rhetoric of fear. Indeed, according to some of them, the Roma community invoked, rather, feelings of sadness and pity.

However, at the end of November, the Geneva High Council partially accepted the two draft bills by voting for a new prohibition on begging, which came into effect as of January 2008. This criminalization established administrative sanctions, including fines, and the possibility for the police to seize monies gained through begging, which was a new element not present in previous legislation. The next section looks at the three main positions identified in the Parliamentary debates leading to the prohibition of begging.

---

4   Although liberty to enter the country does not yet mean the freedom to work, as restrictions on these two countries will remain in place until at least 2016.

5   We use the term 'so-called' in order to make clear that we are alluding to a social representation; as Tabin and Knüsel (2014) point out, the use of the categorization 'Roma communities' only recently came into common use, mainly as a result of political effort. It should be understood, for the remainder of the article, that in referring to 'Roma communities', we are referring to the social and political representation of that community.

6   Due to the fact that numbers are collected in a certain political and social context, they are have a number of limitations. Nevertheless, as they have been used in parliamentary debates, we considered it important to mention them.

A Typology of Positions:
Populist, Humanist and Legalistic Discourses

The aim of this article is to understand how begging gained traction as a socio-political issue and how its prohibition was legitimized on the political front. In order to do this, we centred our analysis on debates among members of the Geneva High Council from 2006 to 2012, with the aim of identifying how they discussed beggars, begging and the public space. This Council can vote on laws that fall under the purview of the canton of Geneva. It is an elected Council made up of 100 members, who are representatives of seven political parties.[7] Its role is to survey the administration of the Executive and oversee the production of legislation.[8] Our data comes from about fifty transcriptions of oral debates that took place during parliamentary sessions, but also from motions, official questions and draft bills that were put forward in the same political arena.

We conducted our analysis in the ethnomethodological tradition, which considers discourse as a social practice that both reveals social constructs and allows their construction (Garfinkel, 1967). This is complemented by the sociology of representation (Jodelet, 1989), which holds that to understand individual conduct, we need to understand the social representations that underpin it. From a methodological point of view, it is impossible to interview someone directly about how he or she represents a particular issue, because they are often unaware of it. That is why studying representations involves reconstructing them by analysing discourses on particular situations or practices.

In order to classify the representations used by Council members, we used an analytical grid developed by Parazelli (2013), on the basis of research carried out by Karsz (2004), which enabled the identification of three different perspectives of the representations: the cognitive, the ethical and the political. The grid allowed us first to identify the cognitive perspectives, or how political figures have taken up the question of begging – through the description of the parties concerned and their activities, the causes of begging, etc. Ethical perspectives are identified from the way Council members formulated the problematic nature of the issue. Finally, the political perspectives are how those members then went on to position themselves with regard to the type of intervention required by the situation.

---

[7]   Secretary-General of the Council (2014) Statistiques électorales: Grand Conseil de la République et canton de Genève [on-line]. Available from: http://ge.ch/grandconseil/data/divers_publication_pdf/statistiques_electorales.pdf [05.05.2015].

[8]   Secretary-General of the Council (2013) Grand Conseil de la République et canton de Genève. Grand Conseil Mode d'emploi. [on-line]. Available from: http://ge.ch/grandconseil/data/divers_publication_pdf/2013_11_08_mode_emploi_gc.pdf [05.05.2015].

The results of our study highlight three positions or political perspectives on the issue of begging and its legal prohibition – populist, humanist and legalistic. These come from how Council members describe the practice of begging (cognitive perspective) and how they judge it as problematic or not (ethical perspective), and they are partially associated with the political orientation of those involved; the populist and legalistic positions are mainly held by right-wing party members, [9] while humanistic discourse is often used by left-wing party members.[10] However, as individual positions are often more complex, the typology we propose goes beyond a classification by political party (Schnapper, 1999) and highlights the dominant representations that led to the decision to prohibit begging. A better understanding of these representations makes it clear why this type of regulation of the public space was chosen in Geneva. Starting from the analysed debates, which preceded the decision to prohibit begging and which took place at the cantonal government level, we explain below how the perspectives that underpin each discourse hang together, to better understand how the prohibition was legitimized as the solution to an identified problem.

The populist discourse

In this discourse, from a cognitive perspective, the beggar is understood in terms of an old-style dichotomy between the good and the bad; the worthy and the unworthy; the real and the fake; and the lawful versus the unlawful. These are historical representations linked to the duality of poverty (Damon, 2003). Tabin and Knüsel (2014) show how this distinction between 'real' and 'false' poor people has a long history and that it is used today precisely to determine who is worthy of being helped and who is not.

In the discourses we analysed, people who are begging are depicted as 'false' beggars, in particular because they are presented as foreigners acting in strategically organized groups. "We all know it, these are not individual initiatives, but rather perfectly well-organized and structured networks…" (S.B., T.C., E.S., S.B., Mouvement Citoyen Genevois, 23.05.2006)[11]

Even if the so-called Roma community is not always explicitly named, expressions such as 'those people' may be understood as a way of constructing a normative border between natural and fundamental differences. This 'us and them' dichotomy

---

9 The original names in French of the right-wing parties in question are: Union Démocratique du Centre (UDC), Mouvement Citoyen Genevois (MCG), Parti libéral (PL), Parti Radical (PR) and Parti Démocrate Chrétien (PDC).

10 The original names in French of the relevant left-wing parties are: Parti socialiste (PS) and Les Verts (V).

11 In these references to parliamentary debates, the initials at the beginning of the reference indicate the name of the Council member uttering the sentence.

has been constructed over time based on the idea that social welfare and assistance must first of all be provided to the residents and citizens of Switzerland (Tabin and Knüsel, 2014). The distinction is also made in connection with the way begging is supposedly operated collectively by this community, which leads to a discourse using threats of the multiplication of foreigners, with words such as 'troops' and 'invasion' often being used to describe their presence. This type of discourse evokes images of strategic, rationalized and organized begging practices, which are directly opposed to the 'requirements' of humility and shame in the traditional image of poverty. An emphasis is placed on the dimension of economic profit by referring to begging as an 'industry'. It is a commonly-held idea about Eastern European beggars that they are nomadic and supposedly organized in a clan system; this network-style organization is then easily associated with Mafiosi-style structures, even though they may simply be family-oriented groupings (Rullac, 2008).

The discourses analysed reveal little interest in the lot of individual beggars and few calls for pity and charity, but rather they actively depict a collective figure that is presented as responsible, organized and criminal, and is thus more easily identified as an unlawful and dangerous presence in the public space in Geneva. Begging activities, viewed as 'criminal', are described as being constantly on the rise, and as making the population of Geneva feel unsafe, creating squalor and disturbing the peace through an 'increased use' of public space. 'Aggravated begging' is singled out through mention, for example, of the exploitation of human beings (even children!), aggressive behaviour or criminal acts conducted in parallel.

> "In addition, I think that we should not confuse things: there is begging tourism, which is practised by travellers – all those gypsies who settle in camps just outside our borders, who hold out their hands by day and, by night, brandish the screwdrivers and crowbars they use to rob our homes – and then, there are the real beggars, those who have been moved on as a result of the State Council and City of Geneva action plan, at least from our territory." (R.G., Mouvement Citoyen Genevois, 30.11.2007, Debate PL 10106A)

This 'rhetoric of evidence', using the ideas of insecurity, invasion and deception, consists of asserting facts without providing proof (Tabin and Knüsel, 2014). In outlining the unacceptable nature of their practice, it contributes to the labelling of a specific category of beggars in Geneva as problematic.

In order to make clear why this kind of begging is unacceptable, Council members often contrast it with another form of begging considered as legitimate – that is, begging carried out by poor Swiss people, depicted as solitary and vulnerable individuals who do not pose a threat.

> "We are not speaking about racism, anti-racism or any other kind of -ism! It is just that those kinds of people are not real beggars, in the majority. Still, if someone is really in need, then we would help them. Poor people do truly exist among us." (C.J., Mouvement Citoyen Genevois, 30.11.2007, Debate PL 10106A)

Begging is seen as particularly unacceptable because of its negative impact on the appeal of the city, resulting in negative economic consequences.

> "For me, and for those who earn their living from business people, tourists and the diplomatic corps, I must say that we have been immediately penalised: a number of conferences have been cancelled, because people feared what they were seeing in the streets!" (P.G., Union Démocratique du Centre, 30.11.2007, Debate PL 10106A)

The fact that cantonal elections were due to take place the following year is an additional key to understanding how the 'Roma issue' became characterised as problematic. As outlined by Kuehne (2010), positioning oneself against a poor and visible population of foreigners is a good way to gain votes, in particular in a context of crisis that favours feelings of anxiety and xenophobia.

This analysis of how these Council members understand and judge beggars and begging shows that they position themselves on a political level with respect to the prohibition of begging. The rhetoric of insecurity and deception used in this discourse depicts a type of begging that is considered unacceptable in Geneva due to the public safety issues it brings – these are the reasons that it must be prohibited. In other words, populist discourse at the political level is used to call for a highly repressive intervention against certain kinds of begging practices in Geneva. Beyond prohibiting begging, it is also used to promote the expulsion of the Roma population.

The humanist discourse

On the cognitive level, the humanist discourse does not create a very detailed picture of beggars or of begging. Compared to populist discourse, which is replete with facts and figures, in this discourse a general claim is made about growing levels of poverty all across Europe by actors who are particularly scattered.

> "You see, begging is really just another way of seeking to meet one's needs." (A.V., Parti Socialiste, 30.11.2007 Debate 10106-A)

In this discourse, the conflation of begging and the Roma community that has been constructed by right-wing parties is denounced. Paradoxically, however, in drawing attention to the stigma, the discourse actually results in an increased focus on the

population. The few attempts made to show alternative versions of the reality of the situation tend, in fact, to repeat the stereotypical descriptions of foreigners coming to beg in Geneva.

> "You have stigmatised certain populations, in particular the so-called "Roma community", but we know that among beggars in Geneva, even if Roma people are present, there are also people from other East European countries. We can also see Romanian people begging who are not part of the Roma community." (V.K., Parti Socialiste, 30.11.2007, Debate PL 10106-A)

In the humanist discourse, this population is seen as being discriminated against and stigmatised, and a particular emphasis is placed on the historical aspect of this discrimination and on the economic and macro-social factors that have led to the presence of the community in Geneva.

> "The bilateral negotiations currently underway between Romania and a number of European countries mean that we cannot go on ignoring Roma or refuse to accept them as we would any other citizen of the European Community. Whether we like it or not, their story has become our story". (Parti Socialiste, 13.11.2007, PM 1793, p.2)

The links between the Roma population and beggars is further reinforced by the fact that, even as these humanist arguments were being raised, two draft bills were posted by members of left-wing parties aimed at providing financial support for the Roma populations in their countries of origin.

For these Council members, the begging in question is legitimate from an ethical perspective, and should not be associated with criminal activity – begging is viewed as necessary for survival, particularly in the face of economic inequalities. However, the depictions of begging used in this discourse do not often address the effects of such practices on how public space is shared and they struggle to counter the public safety arguments put forward in populist discourses. They tend, rather, to reify this practice as *natural* for the Roma community.

> "These Roma claim the right to not live as others do, yet they do not seek to impose their way of life." (Parti Socialiste, PL 10106-A, report)

Council members adopting this discourse put forward arguments based on respect for the Roma population, but end up avoiding the subject of begging and therefore failing to respond to the concerns raised by those using populist discourses. Some of the descriptions seem, paradoxically, to support populist arguments – for example by confirming the existence of organised, criminal begging.

> "With regard to organised begging, which could additionally involve robbery, the exploitation of children or of handicapped people, existing legislation on such criminal matters is adequate to deal with it (…)" (M.C., Verts, 30.11.2007, Debate 10106-A)

Given that begging is not considered to be problematic in itself (from an ethical perspective), those using the humanist discourse oppose the prohibition on begging because they believe it would not be a solution (from a political perspective). Nonetheless, the alternatives that they propose focus on international humanitarian aid and fail to address issues identified in the other discourses in relation to the use of public space.

Legalistic discourse

From a cognitive perspective, this third type of discourse involves questions related to political and legal positions, including criticism of the various political mistakes that have been made in the regulation of begging practices, and the discourse involves a view of people begging as victims – not as in the humanist discourse, but as victims of the political error that was made in removing the prohibition on begging, which is seen to have created a 'magnet' effect.

> "But if they are coming to Geneva, there must be a good reason! Why aren't they going to Zurich, Basel or Lausanne? That is the question we should ask. It is clearly because the department gave up applying regulations that we have become something like a magnetic pole, favouring this activity on the streets of Geneva." (G.C., Union démocratique du centre, 30.11.2007, Debate 10106A)

As in the populist discourse, beggars in legalistic discourse are perceived as foreigners, specifically Roma, and as responsible for all kinds of damages. It is interesting to note that within this discourse there is little attempt to de-stigmatise the Roma community and that only a few voices raised the issue – mostly following the vote to prohibit begging in 2007; it was pointed out, for example, that "among the beggars, there are also poor people from here" (PR, debate M1794, 19.09.2008) and that the concept of beggars and representatives of the Roma communities were being used interchangeably (PDC, debate M2073, M2067, 8 June 2012).

Council members who adopt this position view the links between begging and crime as more complex (without dismissing them) than those using a populist discourse, while also referring to concerns about public safety among the general population.

> "Many citizens are complaining about aggressive begging which is taking place near the Bank dispensers or near to Bank offices. Old people and women feel unsafe because of beggars or shady characters." (E.S., H.R., S.B., Mouvement citoyen Genevois, 13.11.2007, M1794, draft bill)

From an ethical perspective, if legalistic discourse presents the situation as problematic in terms of the increased use of public space and public safety, it is nonetheless a call for the previous prohibition to be reintroduced without any real debate on the merits of the question.

> "The draft bill which we are bringing before you this evening does not aim to "ruin beggars' lives" – to use the expression which has often been coined in relation to the plan for begging – it simply, more simply and more humanely, aims to make clear that begging is not permitted in Geneva." (O.J., Parti Libéral, 30.11.2007, Debate PL 10106A)

In this discourse, what is considered most unacceptable is that the prohibition was lifted arbitrarily. An analysis of the political perspective within this discourse clearly shows that the prohibition of begging is justified on the grounds that the prohibition has always existed in some form. After a period of perceived political fuzziness towards the toleration of begging, this discourse wants a clear message on prohibition.

> "I believe that it is important not to confuse the sadly problematic question of the Roma – the sad problematic of the thousands and thousands of beggars around the world – with this draft bill which seeks to re-establish this regulation." (F.H., Parti Radical, 30.11.2007, Debate PL 10106A)

For those using legalistic discourse, the prohibition of begging is justified by the fact that it has always been prohibited.

Three Positions Leading to One Prohibition

The following table summarises the principal tendencies of the three positions detailed above, in order to make our analysis clearer.

Table 1. Summary of the three positions, presented from the various perspectives

	POPULIST	HUMANIST	LEGALISTIC
Cognitive perspective	Begging by foreigners, in particular the so-called Roma population, is presented as organised, criminal and causing social insecurity	Process of ostracising and discriminating against so-called Roma population; begging as a necessary and legitimate practice	Political problem and 'magnet effect' attracting beggars
Ethical perspective	This particular form of begging (by the so-called Roma population) is unacceptable	It is unacceptable to stigmatise the so-called Roma community	It is unacceptable to suppress the prohibition against begging
Political perspective	Proposes prohibition, validated by a rhetoric of insecurity	Against begging being prohibited as this will not solve the problem (pointless, inefficient); begging is not seen as being problematic	Prohibiting begging is justified by the fact that it has always been prohibited

At first glance, the political debates that led to the prohibition of begging in Geneva seem to be articulated within the traditional right-wing – left-wing opposition, which reinforces the entrenched, almost caricatured, nature of the discourses; when the former call for more repressive actions in relation to begging practices, members of left-wing parties argue against what they perceive as the new criminalization of poverty.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the viewpoints expressed in the discourse of Council members enables us to present a more nuanced understanding of the debate. Even if the discussion is partially determined by political standpoints and the defence of political interests, the adoption of the anti-begging law in Geneva in November 2007 was due to multiple factors.

The arguments used by Council members, from a cognitive and ethical perspective, contribute in different ways to the creation of a common image of a specific type of beggar. From a cognitive perspective, all three discourses reinforce the image of beggars as foreigners and, more precisely, as belonging to the Roma community. Indeed, the great majority of the Councillors make explicit (or sometimes implicit) mention of the community or refer, more generally, to beggars from Eastern Europe. In many of the representations within populist or legalistic discourse, all so-called Roma people are beggars and are involved in different types of illegal networks; beggars create insecurity and are all foreigners. Astonishingly, the humanist

discourse has trouble in countering this depiction. In seeking to show how Roma are stigmatised and discriminated against, those using a humanist discourse have in fact contributed to focussing the debate on this community and have thus tended to reinforce this connection. They have sought to change how the community is depicted without proposing an alternative description or understanding of begging practices in Geneva and by stereotyping the culture of the Roma community.

The tendency to conflate this population has been noticed elsewhere: all over Europe Roma communities are subject to a kind of strangeness, linked to moral depreciation and rejection, which leads to the normalisation of differential treatment.[12] They are supposed to live and act according to other values and norms. Indeed, there is little space for pluralisation in how the Roma community is represented by Council members.

The lack of contestation of the image of a threatening alien beggar enables, in the discourse we have called 'populist', the construction of hierarchical normative ideas about begging: some types of begging are seen as legitimate, and therefore tolerated, in sharp contrast to other practices that are presented as scandalous. The distinction is principally based on a rhetoric of concern for public safety and the increased use of public space on a normative and symbolic level. This normative categorisation of marginalised populations contributes to their being treated differently.

Another common cognitive perspective involves a rhetoric of insecurity. Due to a period of confused and contested political discourses on the regulation of begging practices (prohibition-authorisation-repression), the legalistic and populist discourses converge on the importance of sending a clear message. In the populist discourse, the principal argument against begging as it is described (organised, criminal and carried out by foreigners) is that of public safety concerns. To respond to concerns over public safety, strong decisions need to be taken. These arguments are founded in the rhetoric of invasion and the 'rhetoric of evidence', which depict (so-called Roma) beggars as a threat to social peace. In parallel, the legalistic discourse calls for the protection of 'our population' in relation to concerns about public safety. Additionally, in order to ensure that the need for security is felt, the legalistic discourse heavily emphasises the need for a clear message to be given, following the somewhat confusing legislative changes of the past (prohibition-authorisation-repression). Finally, the 'magnet' effect (where permitting beggars attracts them to the city) is significant in both populist and legalistic discourses. As previously indicated, the humanist discourse has trouble countering these points, focussing its rhetoric on repairing the image of the Roma community and bringing

---

[12]   Tommaso Vitale, Vers des permis de mendier? [interview by Sophie Dupont] Le Courrier, 13 juin 2013.

in structural factors like globalization and social injustice to explain their presence. Paradoxically, this discourse reinforces a sense of insecurity by reinforcing the idea of a mass arrival of foreigners in difficulty, despite the objective of denying it.

The two main cognitive perspectives examined above reveal a representation of a collective group of threatening foreigners begging in Geneva. Indeed, from an ethical perspective, even where begging is not perceived as a problem *per se*, the depiction of begging practices in the discourses suggest that beggars are an unacceptable presence in the public space – in the populist discourse because of the threat to public security; in the humanist discourse because begging as a necessity to fulfil basic needs is unacceptable and evidence of social inequalities and poor living conditions. In the humanist discourse, opponents are accused of attempting to expel foreigners without resolving this issue, but rather than suggesting alternatives for how public space might be shared, criticism of the prohibition is focussed on its discriminatory nature and the criminalisation of poverty. This failure may have contributed to the notion of begging as an unacceptable practice.

Indeed, from a political perspective, even if some begging practices in Geneva at the time were considered problematic, what is more striking in the analysis is the lack of alternatives proposed to regulate the situation. Few possible courses of action were proposed or discussed, including less repressive measures such as the use of permits, restricted areas or specific hours, or the control of identities, all of which have been tried in the European context. The importance of delivering a clear message was highlighted by a majority of Council members as essential, yet a strategic and comprehensive plan by the municipality and cantonal authorities has been missing for too long.

Conclusion

The analysis of these three typical discourses reveals that the majority of positions are based on common normative references on the way public space should be shared. The discussions held over several months by the members of the High Council of Geneva were less concerned with the significance, symbolism and values of begging than with a shared perception of the excessive use of public space by a group of people described as foreign and stigmatised for acting according to different and incompatible cultural norms. Many representations by Council members focus on the presence of beggars – mainly presented as organized in groups – as visible and disturbing, and as presenting a threat to Geneva's population and its image as a wealthy city.

Moreover, despite the fact that begging is presented as the core topic, the parliamentary debates analysed here are not really focused on the practice itself or on whether it is acceptable or not. Regardless of the discourse involved, and whether beggars are perceived as a threat to security or as victims of globalisation or judicial error (cognitive perspective), the representations made within these three types of discourse converge on the fact that the issue of a certain population begging in the public space remains unresolved. There is a shared understanding that the main begging problem that Geneva faces – and that politicians feel compelled to resolve – is the presence of so-called Roma on the streets. As observed by Rullac in French parliamentary debates on the same topic, whether beggars are considered victims in need of help or offenders who require punishment, their integration into society is not a given and requires significant further negotiation (Rullac, 2008).

According to our analysis, these are the main elements that have contributed to the decision to implement a complete prohibition on begging in the streets of Geneva's canton. Beyond a mere discourse on the toleration of begging or otherwise – which seems largely irrelevant here – Council members were addressing normative issues related to the presence of poor foreigners, the city's reputation and how public space should be used.

Our study reveals that scientific understanding can help to move beyond a simplistic interpretation of political decisions as only being concerned with local political interests. Our focus on how begging was depicted and represented within the debate on begging enables the identification of more fundamental issues, such as how contemporary society sees the moral and symbolic regulation of public space, which leads to broader reflection on daily interaction with marginalized populations. Finally, it allows a better understanding of shared reference points and common normative values, which favours the formulation of innovative and alternative forms of regulation, accentuating more democratic and participative types of public space sharing.

› References

Amster, R. (2003) Patterns of Exclusion: Sanitizing Space, Criminalizing homelessness, *Social Justice* 30(1) pp.195-221.

Bertrand, V. (2003) La mendicité et l'état dangereux: l'historicité des représentations sociales dans le discours juridique [Begging and the Dangerous State: The Historicity of Social Representations in Legal Discourse]. *Connexions* 80(2) pp.137-154.

Damon, J. (2003) Cinq variables historiques caractéristiques de la prise en charge des SDF [Médecine et Hygiène] [Five Historical Variables Characteristic of the Management of Homeless People]. *Déviance et société* 27(1) pp.25-42.

Damon, J. (2007) Pour les toilettes publiques… , [For Public Toilets…]. *FEANTSA Magazine*: *La criminalisation des sans-abri* Summer 2007, p.5.

Doherty, J., Busch-Geertsema, V., Karpuskiene, V., Korhonen, J., O'Sullivan, E., Sahlin, I., Tosi, A., Petrillo, A. and Wygnanska, J. (2008) Homelessness and Exclusion: Regulating Public Space in European Cities, *Surveillance & Society* 5(3) pp.290-314.

Doise, W. (1990). Les représentations sociales [Social Representations], in: J.F. Richard, R. Ghiglione et C. Bonnet (dir.), *Traité de psychologie cognitive*, vol. III, pp. 113-174. (Paris: Dunod).

Fernàndez Evangelista, G. (Coord.) and Jones, S. (Eds.) *Mean Streets: A Report of the Criminalisation of Homelessness in Europe* (Belgium: Chauveheid).

Fraysse, B. (2000) La saisie des représentations pour comprendre la construction des identités [Using Representations to Understand how Identity is Constructed]. *Revue des sciences de l'éducation* 26(3) pp.651-676.

Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall).

Ghorra-Gobin, C. (2000) *Les espaces de la médiation: réinventer les «espaces publics» comme symbole de la médiation* [Mediation Spaces: Reinventing 'Public Spaces' as Symbols of Mediation]. [on-line]. Available from: http://www.unesco.org/most/cyghorra.htm [04.01. 2015].

Intartaglia, J. (2010) La ville comme marque, effet de mode ou véritable outil? [The Town as a Brand: Fad or Genuinely Useful?]. *Tracés* (10) pp.7-8.

Jodelet, D. (1989) Représentations sociales: un domaine en expansion [Social Representations: A Growing Domain], in: D. Jodelet (Ed.) *Les représentations sociales*, pp.47-78. (Paris: PUF).

Karsz, S. (2004) *Pourquoi le travail social? Définition, figures, clinique* [Why Social Work? Definitions, Facts, Clinics]. (Paris: Dunod).

Kuehne, F. (2010) *Perceptions and Reactions to the Presence of Romanian Roma in Geneva. An Example of Denial of Access to the City and to Social Rights* (Amsterdam: Unpublished Masters Thesis).

Leresche, J.-P. (1998) Les villes suisses à l'épreuve de la pauvreté [Swiss Towns Challenged by Poverty]. *Gouvernances* (80-81) pp.101-107.

Mager, Ch. and Matthey, L. (2010) Sages comme des images? Le leurre du marketing urbain [Wise as a Picture? The Lure of Urban Marketing]. *Tracés* (10) pp.10-12.

Noisette, P. and Vallérugo, F. (2010) *Un monde de villes. Le marketing des territoires durables* [A World of Towns. The Marketing of Sustainable Regions]. (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube).

Parazelli, M. (2009) Existe-t-il une «morale globale» de la régulation de la rue? Réflexions autour de l'hypothèse d'un imaginaire écosanitaire [Are there 'Global Ethics' on the Regulation of Public Space? Reflections on the Premise of an Imaginary Environmental Health]. *Géographie et cultures* (71) pp.91-111.

Parazelli, M. (2013) *Les enjeux du partage de l'espace public avec les personnes itinérantes et sa gestion à Montréal et à Québec. Perspectives comparatives et pistes d'actions* [The Issues of Sharing Public Space with Homeless People and Its Management in Montreal and Québec]. [Rapport de recherche. Programmes actions concertées] (Montréal: UQAM).

Perraton, C. and Bonenfant, M. (2009) *Vivre ensemble dans l'espace public* [Living Together in the Public Space]. (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec).

Potts, C. and Martin, L. (2013) Penal Vision of Homelessness and Responsabilisation in Belgium, in: G. Fernàndez Evangelista (Coord.) and S. Jones (Eds.) *Mean Streets: A Report of the Criminalisation of Homelessness in Europe*, pp.76-89. (Belgium: Chauveheid).

Rosemberg, M. (2000) *Le marketing urbain en question. Production d'espace et de discours dans quatre projets de villes* [Urban Marketing in Question: Producing Space and Discourse in Four Urban Projects]. (Paris: Anthropos).

Rullac, S. (2008) *Le péril SDF. Assister et punir* [The Homelessness Danger: Help and Punishment]. (Paris: L'Harmattan).

Sanders, T. (2007) Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career, *Feminist Criminology* 2(1) pp.74-95.

Schnapper, D. (1999) *La compréhension sociologique* [Sociological Understanding]. (Paris: PUF).

Tabin, J.P. and Knüsel, R. (2014) *Lutter contre les pauvres. Les politiques face à la mendicité dans le canton de Vaud* [Fighting the Poor: Politics on Begging in the Canton of Vaud]. (Lausanne: Ed. D'en Bas).

von Mahs, J. (2005) The Sociospatial Exclusion of Single Homeless People in Berlin and Los Angeles, *American Behavioral Scientist* 48(8) pp.928-960.