

***Symposium on Jürgen von Mahs (2013) Down and Out in Los Angeles and Berlin: The Sociospatial Exclusion of Homeless People.***

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp.208, \$74.50.

This book sets out to find an answer to the paradox that although the U.S. and Los Angeles (L.A.) have scarce service and housing supply for homeless people, while Germany and Berlin offer a comprehensive system of support and resources also for this group, their share of homeless people is approximately the same. Furthermore, the Berliners' time as homeless is even longer, which implies that exiting homelessness is at least as difficult for them as for Los Angeles' inhabitants. This poses challenging questions for homelessness research, such as: "What role does government intervention play in helping homeless people secure income and shelter and, ideally move on to employment and housing?" (p.2). The author seeks an answer through a theoretical model and analyses of ethnographic data (from Berlin) and secondary research (on homelessness in L. A.).

In Chapter One (and in several other places in the book), von Mahs outlines the purpose, content and structure of the book as well as its theoretical foundation, which comprises Esping-Andersen's welfare regime theory; 'deconstruction' as a method to explain (lasting) homelessness; external and internal determinants of exit from homelessness; and finally, a life course approach to account for homeless persons' different ages, experiences, etc. The author claims that his main contribution to theories on homelessness is his conceptualisation of 'sociospatial exclusion' as the combined result of legal exclusion, service exclusion and market exclusion as the main reason for homelessness. His general conclusion is that homelessness (in the 1990s) lasts longer in Berlin because – although service exclusion and legal exclusion are less severe than in L.A. and the U.S. – regulations of wages in Germany reinforce the market exclusion. The question is then: Does he really show this through an analysis of his data and research literature? In the remainder of this review I will discuss von Mahs' findings and conclusions in relation to his theoretical points of departure, methodology, data analysis, and concepts with a special focus on its possible weaknesses.

The book is explicitly inspired by *Malign Neglect* (1993) by Wolch and Dear,<sup>1</sup> especially its geographic approach to urban development and homeless people's experiences and the ambition to interweave macro and micro data into a coherent theory. Some structural aspects, however, are not dealt with by von Mahs, such as the global restructuring of finances and industrial production. Instead, he draws attention to the unification of East and West Germany. Some of his respondents define themselves as 'unification losers'; they used to have regular life courses, but lost their jobs and housing in connection with the unification. This category of Germans has a situation akin to that of the black industrial workers in L.A. in the 1980s, which Wolch and Dear (1993) analyse in their book. They lost their jobs through the global restructuring of the economy and production, their working skills and experience became obsolete, and eventually they became homeless.

According to von Mahs the 'conservative-corporatist' welfare regime of Germany enables a better and more humane prevention and management of poverty and homelessness than does the American liberal (or residual) welfare state. However, the decisive difference seems to be that the German homeless, as opposed to those in L.A., have the same social rights and access to social security and assistance as other citizens, in other words, that there are welfare arrangements in Germany that are missing in the U.S. It does not matter, then, what kind of welfare regime Germany belongs to; Esping-Andersen's typology should not be necessary to highlight this difference.

As 'internal determinants' of exit from homelessness von Mahs identifies gender, age, health etc., but also three kinds of capital, each connected to one aspect of the welfare regime – social capital (the family), human capital (the market), and social welfare capital (associated with the state). The two latter of these 'nexuses', in turn, correspond with market exclusion and service exclusion, respectively. These theories and concepts make up a neat and comprehensive model for explaining and describing homelessness, but this reader remains unsure of the usefulness of some of the concepts and their actual contribution to our understanding of current homelessness and exit from it. 'Social welfare capital' is defined as 'awareness of, access to, and use of welfare and other social services' (p.7), but in contrast to the general idea of capital as something relational – to a field, a market or a system, and to competing individuals – it is not really used to distinguish between homeless people, but rather to contrast the two countries' welfare systems to each other. 'Human capital' is also, curiously, the only form of capital related to

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<sup>1</sup> It is somewhat troubling that this book, which is mentioned several times (see, e.g., p. 5, 47 and 70), is not included in the list of references. On the other hand, another book by the same authors, *Landscape of Despair* (1987) appears there twice, once as Wolch & Dear (1987) and once (correctly) as Dear & Wolch (1987).

the market, which is otherwise mostly associated with economic capital, at least when it comes to housing. On the other hand, 'cultural capital' could have been useful to explain the relatively bad outcomes for the six respondents with East Germany descent, of whom only one managed to get regular housing within the follow-up period.

As a general explanation for homelessness von Mahs puts forward the concept of sociospatial exclusion, comprising three forms of exclusion: legal exclusion, service exclusion and market exclusion. For some reason 'legal exclusion' is only used to refer to spatial exclusion from certain places in the city, although evictions or, for instance, rejections of undocumented migrants are also regulated in law, and unregulated exclusion might have the same consequences for homeless people in the urban centres, e.g. mandatory entrance fees, or security guards expelling people who do not appear as proper consumers in shopping malls.<sup>2</sup> The concept of 'service exclusion' applies here to the fact that services for the homeless tend to be located outside – excluded from – commercial city centres, and especially in the case of L.A., placed in the most impoverished districts. In addition, von Mahs underlines that the public transport system mitigates such exclusion in Berlin. But what should you then call a tendency of the services to themselves exclude homeless people, for instance because they have failed to look for jobs, or stay sober, or do not fit with the target group? This phenomenon is unfortunately not dealt with at all by von Mahs.

Market exclusion, finally, refers to both housing and employment. Also in discussing exiting from homelessness and the respondents' degree of success in this regard, von Mahs keeps employment and housing together as a whole, as if exiting homelessness would not be possible without a regular work income to cover rents, and as if housing would not suffice to solve individual homelessness. This may be logical in an American context, although the author underlines that while low-paid temporary work in L.A. does give access to housing, it is insufficient to keep it in the long run. However, in a welfare state it should be possible even for unemployed individuals to have a home, and in other contexts the author highlights the importance of housing allowances and public welfare to paying the rent in Germany. Thus, having permanent housing should – in this reviewer's opinion – be a sufficient criterion for exiting homelessness in the final analysis. Likewise, 'market exclusion' should have been divided into exclusion from the

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<sup>2</sup> As von Mahs regrets the scarcity of empirical studies of such exclusion, I take the opportunity to recommend two very interesting Norwegian monographs on this subject: Heidi Mork Lomell (2005), *Det selektive overblikk. En studie av videoovervåkingspraksis* [The Selective Overview. A Study of CCTV Practice], and Ida Nafstad (2013) *Et anstendig menneske. Møter mellom rusbrukere og det offentlige rom i Oslo* [A Decent Person. Encounters between Drug Users and the Public Space in Oslo], both published dissertations in criminology at Oslo University.

labour market and from the housing market respectively, since they require different forms of 'capital'. Furthermore, housing access or exclusion are not only a consequence of the market and the individual's human capital, since many barriers can be removed (or indeed reinforced), through state intervention and public policy, something that Wolch and Dear (1993) highlight in their study of homelessness in L.A. von Mahs himself provides interesting information in his book on the protected market segment policy in Berlin, through which 20 per cent of all new homes are allocated to people who are or risk of becoming homeless (p.118), and which has helped thousands of homeless people to get access to regular housing or avoid homelessness. However, his theoretical model and framework cannot fully account for this great success.

The 28 homeless respondents in Berlin, who were interviewed several times in the course of one year, are divided into five categories based on their lives up to the present homelessness episode. A main distinction is made between those with previously regular life courses – young people with a 'normal' childhood and upbringing, and 'old' people (between 35 and 50 years), who used to have regular work and housing – and those without. The latter, in turn, are subdivided into people with 'transient' or 'deviant' life courses, respectively, and finally homeless people 'with disabilities'. The typology seems to be based on a mixture of common knowledge of prospects on the one hand, and client categories and priorities within the social services on the other. It works decently in some analyses, such as in the interesting observation that older men with previously regular life courses had special difficulties due to their shame and sensitivity to degradation. However, other distinctions could have been discussed, since the outcome in terms of optimizing or stabilizing their situations after one year's follow-up does not really fall out as expected.

In the interesting, but somewhat bewildering, Table 5.1 (p.108) von Mahs lists and typifies the outcomes for his 28 respondents after a year, using a categorization originally created to account for welfare recipients' development. Here 'optimizing' means regular housing and work (4 persons), 'stabilization' housing but no work (12 persons), and 'entrenchment' means being still homeless and living off welfare (12 persons). In discussing his results the author does not really make use of his elaborated previous typology, based on previous life courses, or his conceptualisation of sociospatial exclusion, but remarks rather on the respondents' substance abuse, their amount of help received from social workers, and their degree of activity in looking for work; in other words, he applies a social work perspective. If one does combine the outcomes with the previous typology, it is obvious that six of the eight persons defined as 'transient' were 'entrenched' after one year, but this held also for three of the eight older persons with previous regular life courses, while half of the 'deviant' cases were 'stabilized'. Four were still (or again) in the same transitional

housing, despite the fact that they had received a lot of help from social workers, and two among the six that obtained regular rental housing did not get such help. It seems to me that these results call for more, refined and renewed analyses that might result in a new, empirically grounded, and theoretically informed typology.

The author has a tendency to discuss his results from Berlin as 'evidence' and to compare them with general findings from research into homelessness in L.A., which is sometimes based on completely different methodologies and data. For instance, 16 of von Mahs' 28 respondents were accessed in a 'mid-level transitional shelter', while two thirds of the shelters in Berlin at the time were emergency shelters, or commercial shelters of low quality (p. 33f., 20). The homeless persons targeted by the quantitative studies in the United States were probably found in other kinds of facilities, and since this is a qualitative study, there can be no pretensions on statistical representativeness anyway. More reflection on the sample and its possible bias would have been welcome. In addition, von Mahs keeps 'quantifying' his results (see, e.g., p.56, 108f.). Analytic induction (see Katz 2001), i.e., scrutinising the 'deviant' or 'negative' cases, would probably have been a theoretically more fruitful way of analysing this data.

The book is built on ethnographic research from the 1990s but published in 2013. Therefore, it is strange that Housing First is barely mentioned and not discussed as an alternative way to reduce homelessness. It is also curious to read the author's advice on more individual case management and service-plans, better coordination of services and agencies, and more communication as ways to facilitate exits from homelessness, since such measures are not obviously related to his theory of sociospatial exclusion, nor to his typology of homeless people. In addition, it is unclear how these old, almost ritualistic recommendations for social workers might affect homeless people's access to housing (besides possibly redistribute it). The suggestions that better shelters and more engaged social workers will solve the problem of homelessness are partly based on the result of the follow-up study, which showed that the respondents in a mid-level shelter in general scored better after one year than the others, are not viable without a deeper analysis (especially since we do not know if the former comprised a special selection). Besides, this result was not clear-cut (see above).

This review has highlighted some shortcomings and areas where I think further discussions, research and analyses are needed. This should not hide the fact that *Down and Out in Los Angeles and Berlin* is a zealous theoretical work, with interesting empirical data on homelessness in Berlin. It is well structured and accessible. Several figures in the book illustrate the relations and applications of its key concepts, as well as the differences between L.A. and Berlin. Where they appear, quotes from interviews serve an important function by giving a voice to homeless

people in Berlin and explicating their situation and dilemmas. In this reader's view, the strongest contribution to the general knowledge on homelessness is that it demonstrates how and why the welfare state of Germany makes it somewhat easier to exist as homeless in Berlin, but not to exit homelessness. In summary: This book is definitely worth reading and discussing, even though it will not be the final word in the on-going discussion on how to exit or end homelessness.

### › References

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I was recently asked if I'd be interested in undertaking a review of a newly released book featuring a comparative analysis of the sociospatial exclusion of homeless citizens in two cities: Los Angeles and Berlin. My response was as immediate as it was positive. For the past decade I've been working within and across cities in three countries, trying to tell the stories of the people I meet, both within their individual settings and across those spaces. To discover someone else engaged in this type of work, and to be given the opportunity to get a first glimpse at a body of their work, was a 'happy-making' moment in the usually dreary end of an academic year. Upon receiving the book, I dived in with enthusiasm. It's a slim volume, so it was only a matter of days before I finished my first reading. And when I put it down, two words came to mind: Ambitious and passionate. Allow me to explain why.

The book is ambitious in its purported scope. Too few scholars take on comparative work for various logistical and other reasons. It's expensive, it's challenging to set up two research sites, it is hard work to conduct two or more forays into field research at a time, and finding comparable sites is always problematic. I could go on. Thus a book that promises to compare the treatment of homeless citizens within not only two major metropolitan areas in two very different countries, but across two distinct cultures and languages? Yes, I would consider that to be a very ambitious project.

This book is not that project. Deeming this book comparative in any true sense of the word is problematic for one simple reason: There is no parity – or anything approximating parity – in terms of how data was collected and who it was collected from. For the Berlin phase of research, a series of interviews were conducted in 1998 and 1999 with 28 homeless citizens, as well as interviews with 16 'key informants.' Interview data is supplemented with observations based on field research. It is also rounded out by information collected on the larger institutional and socio-political environment within which the research participants are situated.

Contrast the data collection in Berlin to that of Los Angeles. Whereas in Berlin the approach is said to be 'bottom up', the author inexplicably switches to a 'top down' approach in Los Angeles. The overall effect of employing this alternate perspective on the issue of socio-spatial exclusion is that the lived experiences of homeless citizens in Los Angeles are excluded from this book. And yet, in the first chapter the author specifically advises that for this work he engaged in a "comparison at the urban scale and the scale of *lived experiences*" (von Mahs, 2013, p.3; emphasis mine). Instead of actually tapping into these lived experiences, the reader must wade through secondary data from homelessness service providers published in the 1990s. To be fair, the Los Angeles data is not all based on others' data or references to the literature. Fourteen L.A. service providers and eleven federal policy-makers (or their staff members) were also interviewed (very conveniently the author

appended a list of interviewees). Still, how one can arrive at some notion of individual lived experiences through employing what has been termed a 'top down' approach is not at all clear. Having myself been told often enough by homeless citizens that service providers do not always adequately represent their views, I cannot help but think that the book would have been significantly better, more of a truly comparative endeavour offering real insights into its topic, had the author made any attempt to fly out to Los Angeles and meet even a handful of the thousands of individuals who live there without permanent housing and ask them to share their stories. Instead, we have a book that purports to tell us something meaningful about sociospatial exclusion in two cities for the purposes of helping to inform public policy discussions, and the homeless citizens of one of those cities do not make even the briefest of appearances across its pages.

When comparing two sites, it's critical to explore how they have been shaped by not only socio-cultural factors, but also geographical, political and economic issues, particularly in public policy discussions. These dimensions ought to be examined in order to set out clearly why they are good sites for comparison and what such comparisons will tell us about the applicability of policy transfer from one site to another, as well as the likelihood that such policy transfers might actually take root in adopted soil. As a reading of both the literatures on neoliberalism(s) and policy transfer will tell you, there are not only 'spaces of exception' (Savelsberg, 1994), but also spaces in which, for socio-cultural, political, geographical, and/or economic reasons, some ideologically rooted policy 'innovations' might be borrowed without the wholesale adoption of another country's way of life (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). Thus, we stumble onto another reason why comparative work is seldom undertaken: It is complex, often tedious work to flesh out each of those dimensions in order to explain the possibilities of policy transfer and their potential effects. Some effort is made in the first chapter to establish a comparative framework by looking primarily at differences, and a few similarities, in welfare provision, as well as exclusionary practises directed at homeless citizens in both Germany and the U.S. However, what is missing is that deeper analysis that tells us why Germans have followed the policy paths they have, and why Americans chose the forms of welfare provision they do. We also have no sense of whether, at the local level, Berlin or Los Angeles is representative of the forms of welfare provision in their respective countries. Simply asserting that policies are set at a federal level is not enough; practise occurs at the local level, and while influenced to varying degrees by federal policies and funding, is also the product of local attitudes. Thus, in the U.S., you find cities with varying progressive and regressive attitudes and policies directed towards their homeless citizens. So, why is Los Angeles the paradigmatic example of the U.S.? How similar or different is the treatment of homeless citizens in Berlin compared to how they might be treated in



Munich or Hamburg? Do the attitudes of Berliners represent those in both urban and rural areas? Can they stand in for all of Germany? Such questions need to be considered and in detailed fashion.

Of some further concern is that, based on my reading of this book, Los Angeles appears to be the land that time forgot, forever trapped in about 1997. I recognize that by the time a book is completed and comes to market, there can be a gap of anywhere from one to five years, but this is a fifteen year gap for a book that is supposed to tell us about the strengths or pitfalls of particular forms of welfare provision, so that it can be done better in the future. Berlin is slightly more fortunate, as some effort has been made to update readers on what has taken place there since 1997; however, we don't *really* get much further than about six pages of discussion of select macro-level post-1997 happenings. Such events include the Hartz IV reforms in 2005 and some mentions of the global recession and the potential for negative effects on Germans following the Euro debt crisis (about six pages). Unfortunately, we have no specific data on how individuals themselves – including those who form the basis of much of the earlier analysis – are faring within the current system; rather, we only know how they did fourteen or fifteen years ago.

In relation to the second word that sprung to mind upon finishing this book – passionate – I am referring to both its central argument and the theoretical scope of the book. In essence, this book is intended to serve as a warning: “My intentions, at the time, were twofold: Using the example of homelessness, I wanted to show a German audience that any flirtation with U.S.-style neoliberal policy – hotly debated at the time – was counterproductive and damaging. At the same time, I wanted to show a U.S. audience that an alternative – better provision of welfare, as in Germany – was possible and desirable” (von Mahs, p.ix).

As the author's data makes clear, at the time that this study was conducted, welfare provision in Germany wasn't ideal, but there were no solid indications that Germans were about to abandon their existing system (in 1997) for anything approaching what might have been seen on the ground in Los Angeles. Further, as previously noted, whether Germany was primed socio-culturally, economically or politically to adopt an American style of neoliberalism – a necessary set of preconditions – wasn't concretely set out, so we have no real sense of how realistic such concerns really were or are.

What *is* offered as empirical support for the position that it is possible (or was), that Germans might adopt an U.S. form of neoliberalism, insofar as their treatment of homeless citizens, are three clues: 1. references to 'hot' public policy debates; 2. the fact that Berlin, like many other cities in Europe and North America, had been creating and enforcing bylaws that limit the ability of homeless citizens to utilize public spaces as they might see fit; and 3. the Hartz IV reforms. Of these, perhaps

the most solid indicator provided that Germans might have been flirting with US neoliberalism is the implementation of Hartz IV reforms in 2005. These reforms restructured unemployment and welfare provisions, leaving a sizeable number of claimants with less financial support. What is missing from discussion of these reforms is, however, a broader sense of the contemporaneous socio-political environment in which these reforms came to pass. What is also missing is a deeper sense of the actual impact these reforms have had since 2005. Nor are there references to other relevant reforms that have occurred in Germany over the past 8 years and how these also tie into an overall picture. Reading this book it is clear to the reader that the author is very passionate about warning citizens about the evils of adopting the American style of neoliberalism. This is a position for which I have great sympathy, as I suspect do most people who work in any field related to homelessness and other forms of economic disparity. However, when evaluating the merits of academic work, as should also be the case with public policy and discourse, passion alone should not be the measure.

#### › References

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The forms in which and the extent to which homelessness manifests itself in a society depend not only on the prevailing economic, political and legal conditions at the national level but are, rather, also characterised and moulded to a considerable extent by local conditions. The comparative method, as a quasi-sociological substitute for the experiment, is unfortunately an instrument applied only rarely for better understanding these conditions and developing more successful strategies to combat homelessness. The book entitled "Down and out in Los Angeles and Berlin" by Jürgen von Mahs arouses great interest on account of being, on the one hand, one of the rare comparative studies dealing with homelessness and providing a two-dimensional comparison in this regard, i.e. national (USA, Germany) and local (Los Angeles, Berlin) and, on the other hand, focusing in a consistent manner on conditions conducive to and posing an obstacle to overcoming homelessness.

The empirical basis for the study is formed, for Los Angeles, by a secondary analysis of the already numerous studies on homelessness in that city, as well as expert interviews. To analyse Berlin, which has not been examined extensively by previous studies, von Mahs conducted his own impressively diverse empirical studies in 1998 and 1999. In addition to an analysis of the literature, these comprise surveys (e.g. among neighbours of emergency accommodation shelters), as well as key-informant interviews with representatives of various state and NGO institutions (list 153ff). He also used ethnographic participant observation methods with institutions providing assistance for homeless people, including a one-month stay in a transitional accommodation facility for the homeless. The most extensive source used in the further analysis comprised in-depth interviews with homeless people. Of particular interest in this regard was the experience that homeless persons had with a high number of state bodies and social services, which is a very strong determining factor not only for the circumstances of their lives as homeless people but, rather, also with regard to their chances of overcoming homelessness. The experience and life courses of the homeless interview partners are classified under five different life course types. Subsequently, the specific problems and support needs of the five groups in their attempts to overcome homelessness are described and corresponding requirements for social services drawn up. By way of brief follow-up interviews conducted about one year later, von Mahs is able to document the success or failure of 28 single homeless interview partners in their endeavours to overcome homelessness.

The study results are structured in theoretical terms by loosely following a geographical approach, welfare regime theory, the life course approach of dynamic poverty theory, in addition to a dissertation on the 'internal and external determinants of exit from homelessness' (p.6). Chapters 3-5 analyse the different dimensions of exclusion of homeless people. The situation in Los Angeles and the USA fades into the background at times in this respect, forming in the main a backdrop

against which the substantial empirical material is expounded and interpreted. The chapter on legal exclusion deals with the criminalisation and expulsion of homeless persons by the local state and shows how insufficient financial support for homeless people encourages the development of informal survival strategies and how the life situation of homeless people forces them into a life in the public domain. The fourth chapter looks at the second dimension of exclusion, i.e. 'service exclusion', in a very impressive manner. It shows how the geographical situation of the urban area, as well as poor standards in facilities and accommodation for the homeless, each individually contribute towards exclusion and exacerbate problems of homeless people. Although they offer at least a minimum of assistance and advice as well as the possibility of mutual support and the development of supportive peer networks, they are stigmatising places (p.88) that immobilise their users, promote hopelessness, encourage the consumption of alcohol and drugs and alienate people from contacts with the world of the non-homeless. It is only in well-equipped facilities with intensive social assistance programme that the situation looks somewhat better: "It is notable that, although almost two-thirds of the Wohnheims's (rated as mid-level shelter S.N.) residents found housing, often relying on assistance by social workers on the premises, none of the respondents ever exited homelessness from a low-quality shelter" (p.80).

Barriers of the labour and housing markets, which make it more difficult or impossible to overcome homelessness, are analysed in the chapter on market exclusion, which also contains an introduction to the reform proposals presented, among other things, in the concluding chapter.

The unregulated labour market in Los Angeles, compared to Berlin, makes it easier for homeless people to find work. However, such work often does not provide a living wage and is precarious, meaning that homelessness threatens once again. Von Mahs considers German labour and housing markets to be much more closed than those in the US and Los Angeles. "So-called insiders, participants of Germany's social insurance system, enjoy excellent social protection, whereas so-called outsiders, including the homeless, find themselves increasingly and sometimes permanently excluded from the formal economy, entrenched in and dependent on welfare as their life circumstances deteriorate to the point of hopelessness. The often-inevitable result is long-term homelessness that comes with great personal and cumulative fiscal costs" (p.114). Tight housing and labour markets, market access barriers in conjunction with insufficiencies of social services, as well as inadequate counselling and placement are the essential elements of 'market exclusion' that keep far too many homeless people trapped in their situation.

The final section, chapter 6, first brings together the different dimensions of exclusion, i.e. legal exclusion, service exclusion, market exclusion, to form 'one coherent model of socio-spatial exclusion' (p.122). These are then compared with each other with regard to their reciprocally exacerbating impact on homelessness in Berlin and Los Angeles. One problem associated with von Mahs' study, not addressed by me up to this juncture, a problem which makes it considerably more difficult to get into, takes on renewed significance here, i.e. that the initial thesis of "the prevalence rates of homelessness being almost as high in Germany as in the United States in the late 1990s, affecting close to 1 percent of the total population" (p.1) is contra-intuitive, at least for the European reader, and in addition, not adequately substantiated or, in my view, even verified.

Firstly, with regard to prevalence rates: von Mahs bases the statement that around 1 percent of the population was homeless in the late 1990's both in the USA and Germany on, for the latter, one source, i.e. the National Federation of Service Providers for Homeless People (*Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe, BAG-W*), the only institution that publishes data on the total number of homeless people throughout the entire country. These figures, as well as those cited for the USA, are not discussed on the basis of a critical analysis of the sources or with regard to their comparability (definitions, survey methods). It is not mentioned, for example, that, on account of the lack of official statistics concerning homelessness, the figures published by the BAG-W are estimated numbers, not related to a day count, but rather to the estimated total annual prevalence number of homeless people.

At another point, von Mahs quotes the number of officially registered homeless persons (i.e. without unreported cases, without the homeless living on the streets, based on a day count) in Berlin (p.14, footnote 18). The figure of 11 000 officially registered homeless persons given by von Mahs for 1997 ("late 1990s") corresponds to 0.32 percent of the residents of Berlin at that time, on the basis that there were a total of 3 425 759 inhabitants in Berlin as a whole. If the number of officially registered homeless people amounted to 0.32 percent of the population "in the late 1990s" for the "homeless capital" of Germany, there would appear at least to be a need to explain how that compares with the total annual number of homeless people in Germany as a whole, including hidden homelessness and homeless persons living on the streets, being supposed to have been more than three times as high, i.e. "close to 1 percent" (p.1).

In addition to presenting homelessness as "close to 1 percent", the initial thesis further states: "Not only that, but the extent of long-term-homelessness (homeless spells lasting more than one year) was almost twice as high in Germany, affecting approximately two-thirds of all homeless people nationwide" (p.1). The source quoted in this regard is regrettably unclear. It can be inferred from an earlier publi-

cation by von Mahs (2005) that the statistical reports of the BAG-W must have been referred to in this regard. In the earlier article mentioned above, von Mahs reports, however, that 50 percent of the homeless persons had been homeless for longer than one year. In fact, BAG-W statistical reports available to me online show the proportion of homeless persons who were homeless for longer than one year in Germany between 1994 and 1996 as being 53.1 percent, 49.5 percent and 47 percent respectively.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it should be noted in critical terms that no reliable details concerning the proportion of long-term homelessness in Germany as a whole can be derived from the data contained in the BAG-W statistical reports as these record only a small, non-representative section of the total quantity of homeless people in Germany, i.e. those who receive more intensive personal assistance in institutions run by the non-profit-making homeless assistance organisation which use computerised documentation. Not recorded or under-represented in this respect are those homeless persons who do not have any contact with the non-profit-making homeless assistance organisation (i.e. the vast majority of homeless people), homeless families, homeless persons linked to local-authority assistance systems who live in local municipal shelters, as well as homeless people in the eastern German federal states.

This therefore means that the comparative conclusions placed in the context of the welfare regime theory by von Mahs are also based on very weak premises; i.e. that specific conditions in Berlin, and Germany, (strongly closed labour market, widespread long-term homelessness, access barrier to the housing market), tend to lead to greater long-term homelessness, while the specific conditions in Los Angeles, and the USA, (more flexible labour market, under-employment, inadequate financial support for the unemployed, as well as a more pronounced level of legal and service exclusion), lead more to cyclical homelessness and poorer living conditions among homeless people.

In view of the stronger welfare state and better equipped assistance system for homeless persons in Germany, it is astonishing and needs to be explained why, as referred to by von Mahs on several occasions in his book, Berlin was so ineffective in helping homeless people to overcome homelessness in the 1990s (e.g. p.126). Attempts at explanation presented by von Mahs and the reform proposals building on these would have been more diverse, more precise and, perhaps, would have led to a change of judgements if he had examined in a more detailed manner over time which factors influenced the development of homelessness in Berlin in the late 1990s and the first few years of the new millennium. What is

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<sup>3</sup> BAG-W statistical report – Statistical Data on Homeless Single People Statistische\_Table T 28 – duration of homelessness [http://www.bagw.de/agstado/statistikberichte95\\_96.zip](http://www.bagw.de/agstado/statistikberichte95_96.zip)

striking is that Berlin was successful, following a phase of social distortions related to reunification, in roughly halving the number of (officially registered) homeless people between 1997 and 2004<sup>4</sup>.

An account of this development should have been given, and an analysis carried out with regard to what role the reorganisation (de-institutionalisation and strong preventive orientation), as well as the differentiation and quantitative expansion of programmes offered by the homeless assistance system in Berlin played during those years. Something else that should have been examined, in addition to the absolute number of homeless persons, is the fluctuation caused by those leaving and joining their ranks, i.e. how many new people became homeless per year (and what effect did the expanded preventive system have on this), how many people were able to overcome their homelessness and how many remained trapped in homelessness? The development of housing market conditions should also have been analysed in more precise terms. For Germany, this would also include the development in the number of social housing units, the size of the housing stock earmarked for those seeking accommodation as a priority, and the supply quota for those entitled to benefit from this, as well as the development of rents and the vacancy rate of rented accommodation as an indicator of the tightness of the housing market, plus an evaluation of rent levels considered reasonable by social welfare authorities as an important factor regulating access of unemployed persons to the housing market. These should then have been analysed in relation to the development of homelessness.

Although von Mahs does mention the importance of economic cycles of the housing market, (and labour market), at various points (p.95, p.113, p.115,) as well as the significance of the 'protected market segment' in Berlin (p.135), these factors are only incorporated into his model of socio-spatial exclusion in a very general manner rather than being subjected to systematic analysis. This results in an overemphasis, in relative terms, on what is correct and important criticism regarding the inadequacies of the social services and homeless assistance programmes, criticism that is illustrated in an impressive manner by personal reports emerging from interviews with those affected.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1988, around 6000 persons or 0.29 percent of the population of (West) Berlin were registered as homeless. In 1997, around 11000 persons or 0.32 percent of the population of Berlin (as a whole) were registered as homeless. In 2004, around 6000 persons or 0.17 percent of the population of Berlin (as a whole) were registered as homeless. The number of homeless people in Berlin: von Mahs 14, footnote 8. SN calculations with demographic development data: In 1987 (census), West Berlin had 2012709 inhabitants. In 1997, Berlin as a whole had 3425759 inhabitant and 3387828 inhabitants in 2004. [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einwohnerentwicklung\\_von\\_Berlin](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einwohnerentwicklung_von_Berlin)

The specific reform proposals made by von Mahs accordingly ignore the area of social housing policy, through further development and re-invention of a social housing policy, which should not only be a policy of improving market access. Rather it should also be a policy of de-commodification or restraint of the market, which would constitute an essential contribution towards a successful policy for reducing existing homelessness, as well as preventing a serious housing crisis with structural long-term effects.

Instead, the reform proposals outlined by von Mahs are largely confined to the expansion and improvement of social services. However,

under current political and particularly fiscal circumstances, it is unlikely – unfeasible, even – that social welfare spending and funding for homeless services will substantially increase anytime soon. (...) Under such fiscal conditions, it is simply unlikely that services catering to an already highly stigmatized group could garner the local political and business support to increase service provision, cash assistance, or other benefits which the homeless already perceived as too low in the 1990s. Consequently, it is imperative to develop pragmatic and cost-effective solutions that involve the clients themselves early in the decision-making process (p.132).

Reform demands following this deliberation, i.e. for better case management, improved cooperation, communication and coordination of the social services involved, as well as anti-stigma activities are not only not new; they are disappointingly weak and miss the point (p.132). In the concluding prospects for the basic political conditions and further developments in Berlin and Los Angeles (pp.135 – 138), the focus is again broadened, in particular, towards criticism of neoliberal policy, leading to the declared finding that “(...) this research is a call for *more* – and more precisely, *better* – welfare intervention” (p.138).

## › Reference

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

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Jürgen von Mahs accepted a big challenge: A comparison of Los Angeles and Berlin concerning the sociospatial exclusion of homeless people. His main goal is to explain an apparent contradiction, namely “different welfare systems yielding similar outcomes” (p. IX). One of his provocative theses is an “Americanization of homeless policy” in Berlin (p.23). This statement is founded on a claimed exclusion from public space in both cities. In the framework of a huge ethnographic study with mixed methods he undertook a substantial number of interviews with homeless people and key informants, but also engaged in participant observations. And here the problems start. First of all he collected empirical data in Berlin, but not in Los Angeles. Thus he compares literature-based findings (Los Angeles) with empirical findings added to by a literature review (Berlin). The second, and bigger, problem is that his ethnographic study is around 14 years old. In the meantime radical changes have taken place in Germany. The neo-liberal welfare reforms since 2005 (“Hartz IV”) and the previous modifications of the homeless care had (and have) substantial consequences.

In addition, some of his checked facts (concerning Berlin), are out of date, wrong or imprecise. For example, the most recent valid data on homeless people in Berlin is from 2004, but he claims increasing numbers in several parts of his book. He uses old references, where there are newer ones, and there is considerable confusion about (changed) regulations and structures over the years (number of Berlin’s districts, German currency, legal foundations, etc.). The claimed deportations of homeless people took place in the nineties and are not conducted anymore. The claimed service exclusion (Figure 6.3) is not correct, on the contrary, most of the services for homeless people are located in the centre of Berlin (e. g. the biggest service concentration with night shelters, transitional accommodation etc. is a five minutes walk from the main station). Homeless people are not “contained in service ghettos” (p.128) as most of the needy persons are supported in forms of ambulant care (supported single or group living). Transitional accommodations like (commercial) hostels are mostly located in the centre of Berlin and also the claimed warehousing in low quality shelters was overcome many years ago. Yes, homeless people in Berlin are often “disillusioned, bored and depressed” (p.127), but there are not only “few places they are allowed to remain” (l.c.). So the author can’t furnish his strong statement about the Americanization of Berlin’s policy on the care of the homeless with evidence.

This is a shame because some of his findings are of great interest. Out of his interviews with 28 homeless people he developed different life-course types. The characteristics of the homeless represented in groups concerning personal vulnerabilities, human capital, social capital and pathways into homelessness seem to be quite different (Table 2.1). His conclusion is that this could (or should) affect the acting of the welfare system and its stakeholders. It would have been interesting to

state more precisely what this means. In contrast his conclusions at the end of the book are a little superficial: Case management, (better) communication, and (better) coordination is what he recommends. He states “outsiders’ to the system, including long-term unemployed and homeless people, have difficulties breaking into labour and housing markets, especially during profound economic restructuring periods” (p. 138). Given that von Mahs didn’t interview homeless people in Berlin “during [a] profound economic restructuring period” as mentioned above, it is regrettable that the author does not involve current discourses like that about “Housing First” models in his conclusions. In his book, von Mahs creates a Berlin that never existed in the described form (poor conditions of the nineties mixed with the neoliberal reforms from the nineties until today). This undermines his very interesting and comprehensive empirical study.

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