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Göttingen Campus

Disentangling urban strategies to dispel, remove and repress people experiencing homelessness in the context of commodification and re-regulation of public space

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Introduction

- Increased influence of neoliberal market-based logics not only evident in the reduced access to housing, but also in the increasingly restricted use of public space (especially for rough sleepers)
- Connection to broader developments within neoliberal capitalism: effects of commodification, commercialization and financialisation of urban space
- Situation has worsened in the past two decades: erosion of accessible infrastructures, intensified state regulation, diminished individual agency

➢ The neoliberal state is not (only) a weak and deregulated state, but regulates intrusively the lives of those most adversely affected by its restructuring (see: Wacquant)

Overview

1) Effects of neoliberal restructuring on (people experiencing) homelessness
2) Public space as a (renewed) battleground
3) Tools of exclusion
   - Commodification and privatization of public space
   - Limited access to infrastructure
   - Design and aesthetics
4) Conclusion

Setting

- Side project of:
  „It's your own fault... isn't it? A comparative, urban sociological explanation of homelessness in the interplay of individual, institutional and structural factors“ [research project by Timo Weishaupt; funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG)]
- **Interest**: Understanding how access to / exclusion from housing is realized in everyday practice
- **Scope of study**: Three medium-sized German cities as case studies (Göttingen, Kassel, Paderborn)
- **Research design**: a) expert interviews and narrative, biographic interviews with (formerly) homeless persons (more than 90), b) systematic content analysis using MAXQDA, c) triangulation of interview data (observations, official documents, media)

➢ Extraction of interviews regarding encounters with authorities & exclusion from (semi-)public spaces

➢ *Additional*: Own anecdotal illustrations (esp. photographs)

Space and its control

- Control and allocation of space reflect actors' positions within the social structure. Spatial arrangements linked to social placements (Löw 2001; Bourdieu 1999).
- People experiencing homelessness are in an especially disadvantaged position:

"An agent's position in social space is expressed in the site of physical space where that agent is situated (which means, for example, that anyone said to be 'without home or hearth' or 'homeless' is virtually without a social existence)" (Bourdieu 1999: 124).

- Homeless people also increasingly marginalized and excluded in their access to public space: regulation, restriction and criminalization of their presence in urban environments.

Public space as a battleground (I)

- Harvey (1989): Entrepreneurial City
  - Strategic orientation towards attracting businesses, investors, affluent households, tourism
  - Processes of festivalization (of inner cities) and gentrification (of so-called 'problem districts')
  - Consumption, entertainment and leisure for middle-class families: 'clean' and 'undisturbed' environment

- "Coincidence of places" (Tosi 2007: 226) – city centers most attractive for homeless persons:
  - Higher financial gains in busy areas (panhandling, collecting bottles, etc.)
  - Access to infrastructure
  - Proximity to support networks
  - Community (support, protection, informal economies)
  - Higher social tolerance and anonymity (cf. Bergamaschi et al. 2014)

Public space as a battleground (II)

Consequences:

- Social groups who depend on public space for non-consumptive purposes are viewed as disruptions (especially rough sleepers)
- Increased mechanisms of disciplining in line with the Broken Windows theory – empirically unsubstantiated but highly influential: “The unchecked panhandler is, in effect, the first broken window” (Kelling/Wilson 1982: 30).

➢ Visible manifestations of poverty are labeled as ‘social disorder’ phenomena and linked to discourses of crime and public safety

➢ Blurring of the boundary between undesirable and illegal behavior (Eick et al. 2007)

Commodification and privatization of inner cities

- "Downtown as a Shopping Mall" (Wehrheim 2002)

  "Neoliberalised space excludes without offering alternatives, or any pretense of the co-existence that might have existed previously in the city" (Smith/Walters 2017: 4).

- Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): outsourcing/privatization of urban governance
- Shopping Malls as "pseudo-publicity" (Michel 2018): cleansed of urbanity and democracy, extension of house rules (Termeer 2010), "exclusion through aestheticization" (Wehrheim 2012)

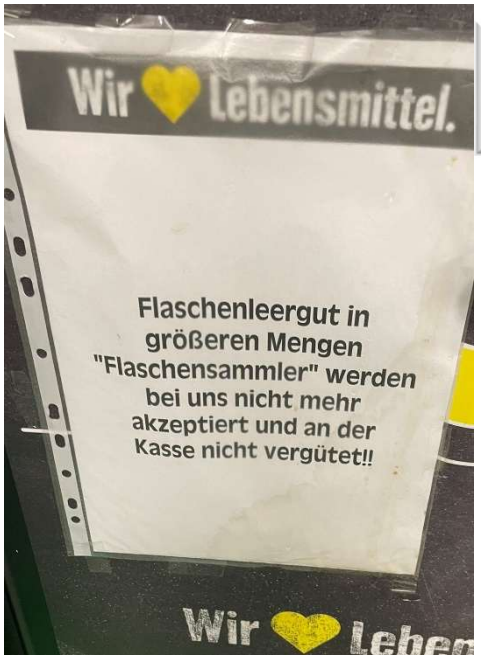
➢ Increasing (legal) regulation of urban behaviors and spaces by police officers, private securities, or business owners: affects sleeping in public spaces, congregating in busy areas, drinking in public, de-facto criminalization of begging, etc.

Expulsion from (semi-)public spaces

They always chase you away in the city center. They're totally cold and just say: 'Yeah, we don't feel sorry for you. It's your own fault you're homeless.' That's what the municipal officers [*Ordnungsamt*; literally: public order office] and police are like. (Valerie)

I was back there, behind the small tax office. I was sleeping there – like, in the early morning around seven – and the police woke me up. Three officers came, asked for my ID and everything. They said: 'Pack your stuff and get out of here.' (Malik)

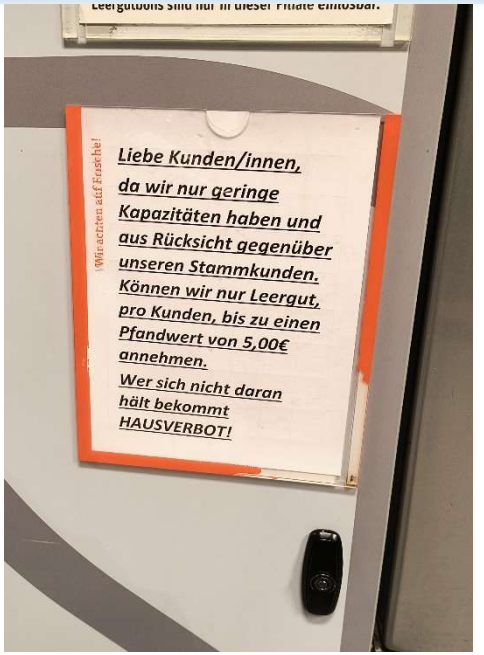
At Stuttgart Central Station, all of a sudden the *Deutsche Bahn* security staff came up to me: 'What are you doing here? Get out of here. Collecting bottles is forbidden.' I said, 'I know, but I'm so poor.' – 'What? You know that? Then it's intentional! Now you're getting reported.' And that's how I ended up getting a citation. (Olaf)



Source: Internet

Large quantities of empty bottles / “bottle collectors” are no longer accepted and will not be reimbursed at the checkout.

Dear customers, due to limited capacity and out of consideration for our regular customers, we can only accept empty bottles up to a deposit value of €5 per person. Failure to comply will result in a permanent BAN FROM THE PREMISES!



Source: Internet

To ensure smooth store operations, we are forced to allow only a limited number of customers into the store.

Only for customers with deposit bottles: Wait here!

Especially on Sundays and public holidays, we are required to clean the bottle return machine regularly. This may result in longer waiting times on these days.

Customers without deposit bottles: Entrance to the right

Infrastructural exclusion

- Growing disconnection from informal access points to urban infrastructure: warm indoor environments (or other sources of heat), free public restrooms, basic hygiene facilities, etc.

➢ Hinders the ability to remain in urban spaces over the long term

- "Zone of infrastructural disaffiliation" (Marquardt 2017): not just the absence of infrastructure, but the active and preemptive denial of access
- House rules in public and semi-public buildings, architectural modifications as well as more implicit measures.

There was this one day, I was inside the train station for like fifteen minutes just trying to warm up, and then they [security staff; JW] dragged me out. […] Pulled me backwards in my wheelchair, threw me out, insulted me, and said: 'Get out, you're not supposed to be here, you don't belong in the station.' (Andrei)

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Hostile architecture

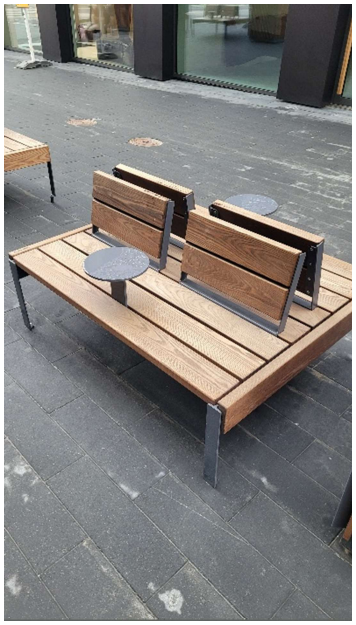
*"Silent agents that manage behaviour in public space, without the explicit presence of the authorities (security, police etc.). These 'agents' are materialised in objects and installations which ensure that control is enforced in the environment" (*Savičić/Savić 2014: 3).

- "The intentional 'designing out' of certain identities, behaviours and categories of people from urban and public spaces" (Petty 2016: 68).
- Three types: 1) Modification of objects, 2) added elements to limit the use of public space, 3) removal of objects (Chellew 2019)
- Newer development: Combining the expression of urban individuality ("artistic features"; Borden 2019) and the implicit exclusion of undesirable social groups.

➢ *Aestheticization of exclusion*

‚Classic' hostile architecture

Aestheticization of exclusion

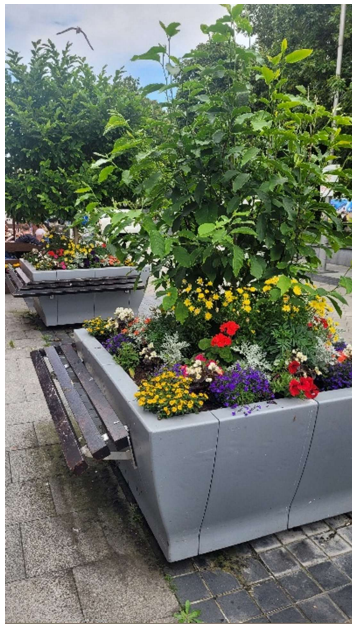

Tallinn

Pisa

Glasgow

Berlin

Birmingham

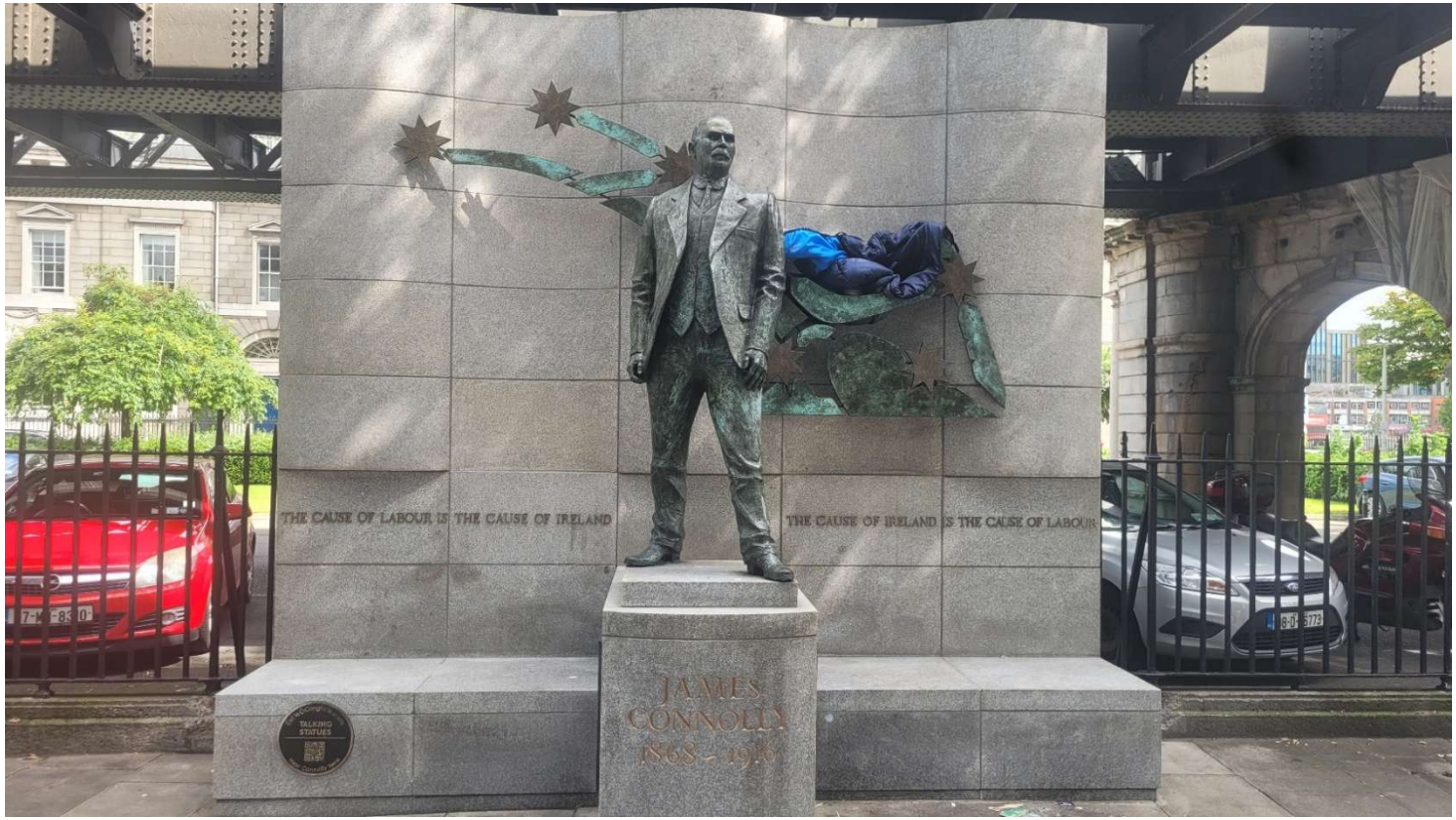

Galway

Conclusions

- Dynamics of neoliberalism: not just deregulation and withdrawal of the state but also processes of re-regulation (especially toward the poor and marginalized populations).
- Increasing restriction of access to public space: Not only through coercive measures but by disguising exclusion behind a creative and individual image of the city
- Shaping perceptions of (non-)belonging -> mentally reinforcing social segregation

No, not the police, more like with people who, you know, when you're sleeping or sitting somewhere at night. They think, 'Oh, that's just some bum, we can go over and mess with him a bit, right?' (Reinhardt)

As a woman, you definitely get spat on. It's not nice. By passersby. You get insulted, harassed, threatened. (Valerie)



James Connolly Memorial, Dublin

Thank you for your attention!