Does Homelessness Undermine Democracy? The Role of 'Home' in Democratic Citizenship

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Abstract

This paper will begin by discussing democracy and explain the role of power in shaping it. This discussion will conclude by arguing that the power relations of that social system must be legitimate for democracy to exist. This concerns members' ability to authorise their governance and conduct their lives autonomously. The conflict between homelessness and democracy is then investigated. Homelessness contradicts democratic social organisation on two fronts; homeless people are too heavily barred from democratically critical processes to be considered equal citizens in a democratic society. This is compounded by their entrenched 'otherness' and segregation. Homeless people cannot legitimise the power inequalities that they are subject to, and therefore cannot be considered as part of the democratic citizenship. I will then challenge three positions from advocates of pluralism and liberal democracy which weaken the duty that democracies owe the homeless. I will argue that these approaches do not meet the requirements of democratic citizenship: If a society wants to claim that it is a democracy, it has a duty to house all citizens, and prevent homelessness.

Legitimate Democracy?

One of the central pillars of modern society is the claim that our society is organised democratically. We underpin claims of democratic governance by referencing processes supporting democracy: one vote per person, regular elections, equal opportunity in accessing positions of governance and a 'free media'. Being a democracy is seen as a good thing indicating our society is conducted based on mutual agreement and consent. However, there are also strong incentives for vested interests to claim democratic status due to its role as a legitimiser of power inequality.

Democracy is one of the great legitimising forces of the current political era. Nearly every state strives to claim that they are organised democratically and are therefore legitimate. Globally, this has resulted in a boom of self-expressed democratic organisation, but also a huge shifting of the conceptual boundaries of democracy. Democracy can be described in thousands of ways (Gagnon, 2018, p.92) - its ontological pluralism makes efforts to locate democracy seem elusive at best, and impossible at worst.

As Katherine Fierlbeck suggests, '*democracy is as much a political strategy as it is a philosophical position'* (2013, p.38). She argues that this dualism of democracy perhaps accounts for the warped growth of democracy worldwide in the past 50 years, where many states like the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea have utilised the legitimising force of democracy without actually becoming more democratic. What Fierlbeck's analysis alludes to is the relationship between the process of democracy and the ontology of democracy.

What follows is an analysis of how our conception of democracy and its processes are dependent on the power relations in play. I will define three terms critical to describing this relationship: power, the 'ontology of democracy' and the 'processes of democracy'.

Power is our ability to shape the world, social and physical in line with our intentions - our 'transformative capacity' (Held, 2006, p. 270, Held and Leftwich, 1984, p.144). Power can be exercised in a number of ways. Most centrally we can make and successfully execute decisions. If the decision is in conflict with another actor, then the execution of that decision is likely to be contested, with the most powerful actor likely to succeed. Regarding homelessness, we should also consider our relationship with the natural environment. We can control narratives, an important part of directing how others in our society execute 'their decisions'. We can exclude others from certain decision-making pathways - overtly stop them voting, or covertly shut them out from political engagement via manipulative social engineering.

The ontology of democracy concerns what democracy is seen or felt as being by the society - the norm of democracy. As such, it changes over time and space, alongside the changes that a society goes through. If a society claims that it is democratic, then it is equating itself to democracy via an ontology of democracy. It is important to recognise that the ontology of democracy can be bent far beyond the constraints that many democratic theorists advocate for; we can feel like we are more of a democracy than we actually are.

Secondly, the process of democracy concerns what actions, institutions, principles, and values we connect to democracy, as well as how they are related. For instance, recent education policy listed examples of what were described as "*extreme political stances*", such as "*A publicly stated desire to abolish democracy, to end free and fair elections, or violently overthrow capitalism*" (Dept. Education, 2022). The connection of capitalism with democracy in this policy may adjust the processes attached to our ontology of democracy. The processes we do and don't connect, as well as how they are related to democracy, are deeply shaped by the power relations of the society.

The role of power in shaping the ontology and processes of democracy means that those with lots of power have a unique ability to affect democracy, even if they aren't explicitly politically involved. As the ontology of democracy legitimises power inequality, this poses a risk that those with power may

use their unique position to cement their positions of power and prevent actual democratic reform. The ontology of democracy often lags behind the real democratic nature of that society vis-a-vis democratic theory. This means that we often can't sense a decline in democracy whilst it is easily preventable. A good example of this can be drawn out of a recent study which indicated that young people are becoming less supportive of democracy's ability to serve its citizens (Foa et al., 2020). Standard analysis at face value suggests young people are leaning toward authoritarian ideology as they are disillusioned with democracy. However, if we look at the relationship between the ontology of democracy and its associated processes, we might reach different conclusions. Perhaps the world young people are living in is less democratic, and their issues are a result of this. Nonetheless, the ontology of democracy suggests that the world they live in is thoroughly democratic. In an ironic turn of events, young people are turning against democracy, even though it may be the solution to their woes.

Democracy at Last

The heart and soul of democracy is perhaps best portrayed through Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address – "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Lincoln, 1863 (1995)). But what does this mean in practice? Government cannot be done by the people equally – not everyone can have the last say (Russell, 1938, p. 16). Rather, individual members authorise their government to act on behalf of the collective body of citizens, and thus 'legitimately' propel them into positions of extreme power. How can we know when these power inequalities are legitimately democratic as opposed to furthering undemocratic relations?

Many theorists essentially place democracy as a product of several core democratic processes which legitimise the unequal power relations of democratic governance. For instance, Dahl argued that large-scale democracy requires:

- 1. Elected officials
- 2. Free, fair, and frequent elections
- 3. Freedom of expression
- 4. Alternative sources of information
- 5. Associational autonomy
- 6. Inclusive citizenship

(Held, 2006, p271; Dahl, 1979;1985;1989)

Dahl argues that these processes result in power relations which better support the idea of governance by the people, of the people, for the people than others, and therefore provide government and social order with democratic legitimacy. Others have argued for various different approaches, which Fierlbeck has summarised into several groupings. Democracy consists of:

'a family of institutions (free elections, political rights, independent judiciary), political values (accountability, toleration, participation), and a propitious political context (a wide availability of alternative sources of information, an ability to meet the basic needs of individuals, an educated population) (see, e.g., Dahl 1971, 1989; Diamond, Lipset and Linz 1989: preface)'

(Fierlbeck, 2013, p. 39)

All of these essentially provide an answer to the question of legitimate power relations in a democracy. These suggestions then enter the ontology of democracy and attempt to align it with something a little bit more democratic. Alongside these academic efforts are the mass of narratives which direct our understanding of what democracy is, and what processes are involved or not

involved in it. The ontology of democracy is continually tossed around by those who have power - leaders, businesses, intellectuals, media and the collective masses. Suffragists may advocate votes for women and equal access to positions of government, whilst vested interests may offer alternatives - 'it'd be against the interests of the people for emotional women to have the vote'. It is therefore essential that we interrogate both the ontology of democracy, as well as its processes in case the powers in play are twisting democracy away from a philosophical position and toward a self-serving political strategy.

Democracy therefore depends heavily on the questions of legitimate power relations; who has power, why they have it, and what they can do with it. Whilst the processes indicated by Dahl et al. may be a good step toward achieving democracy, we must always be wary of growing power inequality in an ever changing world. The requirements of democracy are not stagnant, nor will they ever be; power changes faces and places, and therefore so must our analysis. Essentially, we need to interrogate our ontology of democracy to analyse whether our pleasant feelings of democratic civilisation are being betrayed by reality. We might begin by looking at the extremes of the power scale in our societies today - who has power, how, and why should they have it. This is where this essay takes a turn - instead of looking at who has the most power, we will look at who has the least.

Minimal Power and Democratic Citizenship

There is clearly some level of irreconcilable bad luck when it comes to powerlessness; it is hard to argue that the existence of severely disabled people who are dependent on those around them to function should be considered detrimental to democracy, even though they are relatively very powerless. Our concern therefore is with powerlessness as a product of social organisation, that is, powerlessness which is created, and can be un-created by the societies we live in. We are well acquainted with the idea that those in positions of political power must fulfil certain requirements in order to claim democratic legitimacy, but what about those on the other end of the spectrum? What is the minimum level of power that it is acceptable for a democratic system to allocate to its members?

I believe that the answer lies in whether the citizens have a fundamentally equal ability and capacity to grant authority and engage in the power inequality. For Held, this equates to the 'Principle of Autonomy':

'Persons should enjoy equal rights and, accordingly, equal obligations in the specification of the political framework which generates and limits the opportunities available to them; that is, they should be free and equal in the processes of deliberation about the conditions of their own lives and in the determination of these conditions, so long as they do not deploy this framework to negate the rights of others.'

(Held, 2006, p264)

This precondition on legitimate power relations indicates that minimal power cannot fall below the levels outlined by the 'principle of autonomy' as this level of power is necessary for citizens to authorise their governance and exercise reasonable control over their own lives. Authorising our governance goes further than voting. It involves having the stability, capacity, and education to make decisions over how we believe the society ought to be run, and having the ability to execute such decisions to an extent such that there is no fundamental difference between members of that society. The principle of autonomy thus demarcates the boundaries of legitimate power relations in a democracy, and acts as a requirement if citizens are to have the ability to legitimately authorise their governance and claim democratic citizenship.

In modern western ‘democracies’ are all members provided the opportunity to develop democratic citizenship? Whilst we may reasonably think that issues such as slavery and racial/ gender segregation are no longer a big threat to modern western democracy, there is another group whose level of powerlessness begs questions of democratic legitimacy: the homeless.

Homelessness

Homelessness is a term used to describe those without a home. In much of the world, and in particular western societies, a home is closely related to social norms of housing and property ownership. Those who are homeless therefore often find themselves outside an important part of life in their societies, with a significantly diminished ability to voice their issues, opinions, and situation. Attitudes toward homeless people are spread across the axis of morality and freedom:

“sometimes the homeless are represented as truth-seekers and saintly heroes; at other times the homeless are imagined as a threatening, criminal other-"matter out of place." Furthermore, sometimes the homeless are imagined as completely free, choosing agents; at other times the homeless are viewed as totally constrained, helpless victims of misfortune.”

(Feldman, 2018, p. 6).

An interesting part of Feldman’s analysis is the containment of the homeless to the role of the ‘perceived’, as opposed to the ‘perceiver’. This indicates that it is people from a ‘homed’ perspective who determine the moral and spiritual value of their existence. This suggests that the homeless face a severe level of segregation and ‘othering’ due to our understanding of ‘home’.

By setting the home as the border of differentiation, the ‘homed’ have segregated an already relatively powerless part of the society. This segregation compounds the powerlessness that the homeless face. The strict laws and rights which protect the borders of the house as home further entrench this. The little power which homeless people can wield is often in conflict with the property owning ‘homed’, meaning homeless people are likely to have their efforts frustrated. An example of this is the implementation of hostile architecture, which directly curbs the ability of homeless people to pursue comfort and sleep. Homeless people also run into conflict with the environment more than most, with disastrous effects on their health outcomes. These conflicts affect much of homeless life and combine with a severely low level of power to make it the living hell that it is for most. Powerlessness, segregation, and conflict carries through to homeless people’s ability to engage in the wider political system:

‘Although political equality in the liberal capitalist state has been guaranteed regardless of economic status, an examination of the power dynamics regarding the homeless demonstrates that this has not been achieved.’

(Arnold, 2004, p. 5)

Homeless people do not meet the requirements that democratic citizenship demands. They are removed from almost all opportunities to specify the political framework which determines and limits their existence, and are routinely and systematically frustrated in their ability to determine the

conditions of their own lives. Whilst some issues homeless people face may not be able to be overcome through societal action alone, the issue of homelessness could be significantly reduced. Instead, homelessness has been treated as an unfortunate but acceptable remainder in the long division of socio-economic organisation. There is no whiff of democratic citizenship when it comes to homelessness. In a society which intends on organising itself democratically, the removal of an opportunity to pursue democratic citizenship from a significant group of members must have incredibly strong justification if it is not to score against their claims of democratic legitimacy. So what duty, if any, does a democratic society owe to the homeless?

Democratic Duty

So, how should a society which intends on being democratic respond to mass homelessness? I will challenge three approaches, two from liberal democracy, and one from those who wish to pluralise our understanding of home.

Firstly, I would like to quickly address the suggestion that there is no duty to resolve homelessness. Arguments vary around the idea that homelessness is the result of poor individual choices and bad luck, and state interference would unduly infringe on this. Whilst this view is a rarity in the academic literature on homelessness itself, it is a fairly influential belief across wider society, having been 'neoliberalised' by the likes of Hayek, American individualism etc. A good example of this wacky sentiment is given by Hayek:

"It has of course to be admitted that the manner in which the benefits and burdens are apportioned by the market mechanism would in many instances have to be regarded as very unjust if it were the result of a deliberate allocation to particular people. But this is not the case. Those shares are the outcome of a process the effect of which on particular people was neither intended nor foreseen by anyone when the institutions first appeared… to demand justice from such a process is clearly absurd."

(Hayek, 1976, p.64-65)

The essence of this argument is that the homeless are just the unfortunate losers in the economic game of the housing market, and as market systems aren't deliberately discriminatory, there is no ethical dimension to their outcome. However, if we consider the market in a different way, as a channel of power, we will reach a different conclusion.

"*Human beings have always found naked force or coercion a rather messy, if not downright ugly, business, however necessary… The problem has always been to find some way to clothe its beastliness, some idiom through which it can be made immediately palatable to those who exercise it."*

(Patterson, 1982, p. 18)

The housing market clothes the beastliness of homelessness. We have already acknowledged that power is, in part, a product of social choices. The legal framework limits and guides where power can grow (perhaps through inheritance), and actions such as electing a leader or investing in a business amplify the associated individual's power to transform the world as they see fit. The market is not free

from these decisions; those who have lots of economic power can utilise it via the market to transform the world. They can have 6 houses, a yacht, and a gold encrusted coffin. Those who are relatively powerless aren't so lucky in markets. The homeless are very often homeless because they lack the power to secure housing through the housing market. Surveys by YouGov and Shelter suggest that 34% of UK renters wouldn't be able to pay their rent at all if they lost their job (Shelter, 2023). Social decisions, like distribution of tax burdens, shape the power relations of a society, which shape economic outcomes. To ignore this essential ethical component of market economics is, to quote Hayek, "clearly absurd".

Jeremy Waldron, a longstanding proponent of liberal democracy argues that the only duty society owes toward homelessness is a duty of liberalism, that is, homeless people ought to be given freedom to look after their own needs in public spaces without obstruction.

"*Now one question we face as a society - a broad question of justice and social policy - is whether we are willing to tolerate an economic system in which large numbers of people are homeless. Since the answer is evidently, "yes", the question that remains is whether we are willing to allow those who are in this predicament to act as free agents, looking after their own needs, in public places".*

(Waldron, 1991, 304).

It is unsurprising that Waldron reached this conclusion as he uses the lens of negative liberty to analyse the morality of homelessness, and is therefore restricted to an analysis of the harm of the barriers to pursue necessities. Whilst this is a sound analysis of one of the harms which afflict the homeless, removing the barriers that homeless people face in 'looking after their needs' doesn't enable homeless people to pursue democratic citizenship. Even if Waldron's homelessness appears 'softer' and contains more 'freedom' than previous iterations, the same underlying segregation, and powerlessness which come with being homeless remains.

Pluralists such as Leonard C Feldman and Kathleen R Arnold attempt to resolve this issue by broadening the conception of home such that the homeless no longer face rampant segregation from society and political engagement. "Home should not lead to an exclusive type of territoriality but rather coexistence and mutual respect" (Arnold, 2004, p. 172). These approaches feature a large-scale erosion of the individualisation and privatisation of public space, as well as a broadening of what we mean by 'home'. For Feldman, the return of residential hotels ought to be encouraged, as they not only provide shelter to 'needy bodies', but also shatter the dichotomy of the homed and homeless, thus drawing the two parties closer together (Feldman, 2018, p. 136). If we could expand the 'home' to foster coexistence and mutual respect, would this be acceptable for a democracy?

Homeless people have far worse health outcomes than the rest of the population, with an average age of death of 47 years old (Thomas, 2012; Fazel et al., 2014), and this isn't just because they're not mutually respected. The house is a central part of the 'home' in many countries. Within the house, we are for all intents and purposes free from worry of contestation with wider society, can develop relationships, and establish a sense of home, as well as being shielded from the harms of the environment. By acting as a shield from the powers of the outside world, the house is also a significant determinant on our ability to develop power and thus engage in the wider society. If homelessness increases risk of relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol use, health problems, and being cut off from society, then being homed does the opposite. It is easier to maintain relationships, physical and mental health, and consciously direct your life over the long term if you have a stable home. This is the reasoning behind the groundbreaking Housing First policy which has significantly

reduced homelessness in Finland and international trails (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013; Roggenbuck, 2022). Temporary accommodation, such as residential hotels, acts as an improvement, but not a solution to homelessness. Sympathetic liberal and pluralist approaches soften homelessness. But are they just making homelessness soft enough for 'homed' folk to stomach it? Accepting anything less than an equal right to stable, safe housing would be a disservice to our fellow citizens, especially when our society is fully capable of providing it.

Conclusion

It is now clear that homelessness doesn't allow for development of democratic citizenship and is therefore in contradiction to the requirements of a democratic system. In order to have any chance of developing democratic citizenship, people must be within the constraints of legitimate power relations, demarcated by the Principle of Autonomy outlined by David Held. This principle indicates that at a minimum, members of a democratic society must enjoy equal rights in creating the "political framework which generates and limits the opportunities available to them". Without a place which can reasonably be called home, it is difficult for a member of a society to become a democratic citizen. The modern world places the house as a precondition of home, and therefore, instead of trying to change this, or trying to make homeless life a bit more bearable, democracies have a duty to house their citizens safely, securely, and stably.

As we have acknowledged that the vast majority of homelessness is not a question of voluntariness or justifiable punishment, and as many societies are capable of housing all their members, we can conclude that homelessness is almost always a failure of the society to provide adequate housing opportunities for their citizens. Burdens ought to be distributed based upon who has the power to ameliorate the situation; the state and powerful economic agents ought to bear the brunt of the costs. However, as citizens and authorisers of these power relations, we ought to recognise our responsibility also. As the house is the centre of home in the modern world, this failure bears down on that society's claims of democratic organisation. Avenues for further research may concern the degree that homelessness undermines democracy, as well as how homelessness affects the democratic citizenship of the 'homed'.

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