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Homeless in Hamburg: Revisiting the uses of space in the city centre

Natascha Bregy

Introduction

This article is based on a short fieldwork I did about the use of space among homeless people in Hamburg, conducted in the framework of the seminar with the title “Angst in the City? Ethnographic Research on Emotion and Exclusion in Hamburg and Berlin”. I will start with a summary of the contents, the aim and the method of the seminar (cf. Schröder and Habeck, this issue). I will also briefly talk about my own idea of fieldwork and the opportunity to cooperate with a fellow seminar participant from Berlin. I will then introduce some key works in the field of homelessness and go over to present two key research projects about homeless people in Hamburg that were conducted between 2001 and 2005. The first was done by Professor Waltraud Kokot, University of Hamburg, and some of her students (Kokot 2004). The second was the Master’s thesis of one of those students, Martin Gruber, who did additional fieldwork after Kokot’s project ended (Gruber 2005). Many of my findings coincide with their research, but because of the long term nature of their research, their findings exceed my own and are, therefore, recommendable to whomever wants to know more about homelessness in Hamburg.

As the title of the seminar suggests, it is about emotion and exclusion in cities. We explored the topic through various essays and texts, touching on social exclusion, urban space, identity and emotion. We also approached the topic of urban anthropology and its history, as well as specific methods. The city as a research setting only became popular in social and cultural anthropology after the so called “spatial turn” in the 1980s. (Low 2014) Since then, urban anthropology has changed significantly:

“[...] from a field that focused solely on small-scale societies and groups living in cities, to multilevel and spatial analyses of the urban processes and social relationships. Rather than viewing the city as a static context or setting, it is conceived of as an urban region made up of complex interrelationships of places and a space of flows dependent on the whims of global capital.” (Low 2014: 25-26)

Within this dynamic setting, every participant was to choose a research topic and explore it for a one-month period (June 2015). We then each wrote a short outline of our research. On this basis, participants from Hamburg were

paired with those from Berlin as part of a buddy system. At first I was torn between doing research among refugees and homeless people, finally deciding in favour of the latter. My first outline was as follows:

“Homeless in the city – occupying prominent spaces or generating opportunity?”

What kinds of strategies, reasons and systems lie behind the choices of homeless people in Hamburg, concerning their places to stay in the day as well as in the night? Assuming these are conscious decisions, I would like to know why many homeless people spend their days in the busy streets where they are constantly exposed to other (non-homeless) people. Do these places simply offer the best economic purposes or are there other aspects that influence these decisions?

In addition, I want to inquire if the homeless feel bothered by passers-by and how the outside view shapes their own identity. I assume that this is one more aspect that influences this choice of location.”

Spontaneously, after reading my research outline, one of the participants in Berlin, Claryce Lum, decided to do a similar project about homelessness in Berlin (cf. Lum, this issue). Subsequently, Claryce and I became buddies and developed an outline for our research together. I will further elaborate and discuss our ideas and methods in the chapter about the research process and experiences.

Homelessness in general is a familiar phenomenon all around the world, resulting in a vast amount of publications about different aspects of street life. Philippe Bourgois (2003) won critical acclaim in the world of social and cultural anthropology for his work *“In Search for Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio”* about drug dealers in East Harlem, New York. He managed to gain access to a group of street drug-dealers and accompanied them over the course of five years, through which he gained insight into their street culture. A portrait of homelessness in Russia offers Tova Höjdestrand (2009) with his book *“Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia”*. In *“The hidden millions: homelessness in developing countries”* Graham Tipple and Suzanne Speak examine the phenomenon in the global south, e.g. Ghana, also developing general theories and policy proposals. In his book *“Down and out in Los Angeles and Berlin: the sociospatial exclusion of homeless people”*, Jürgen Mahs (2013) compares, among others, homeless policies, market exclusion, spatial exclusion as well as legal exclusion in Berlin and Los Angeles.

Turning back to Hamburg, I will focus my attention on the two previously mentioned studies: The study entitled *“Kultur der Obdachlosigkeit in*

der Hamburger Innenstadt” (Culture of homelessness in the city centre of Hamburg) was carried out in 2001 by Martin Gruber, Felix Aster and Jochen Becker under the supervision of Waltraud Kokot. They started their research in summer 2000, interviewing and accompanying people from various organisations and also going out into the streets after shops were closed. In November 2000, they started interviewing homeless people and after some time they found a group, willing to take them in. At the time, this group usually gathered at an unused cabin, which was a popular meeting point for homeless people. From early January to April 2001, the researchers spent time with this group: sometimes being just guests and listening to stories, arguments or jokes, sometimes being more involved and accompanying them in their daily life. Later on, the group was revisited for a shorter follow-up study in 2002. (Kokot 2004: 10-16)

In addition to those two research stages, Martin Gruber produced a film called *“abgehakt”* (tallied) about the same group of homeless people he encountered during the first phase of research. Lastly, in 2004, he ventured into the field again for another eight months to complete his research. In the last phase of his research, he changed his focus from the original group and looked at homelessness in a more holistic way. All this combined, 22 months of fieldwork altogether, made up his Master’s Thesis with the title *“Platzverweis: Ethnologische Langzeituntersuchung einer Gruppe von Obdachlosen in der Hamburger Innenstadt”* (Sending-off: ethnographic long-term study of a group of homeless in the city centre of Hamburg).

Although these studies date back more than ten years, the findings correspond closely with what I encountered during my own fieldwork. While reading the study, I felt reassured in my own research, mostly because the findings as well as the emotional aspects coincided with my own experiences. But this also suggests that the key problems around homelessness have not changed significantly over the past ten years. Especially the living conditions and the availability of low-threshold accommodation services have not improved much. It seems that homelessness will increasingly become a regular part of life in Hamburg and it is, therefore, necessary to engage in conversation about the topic. I hope that this paper helps to raise public awareness for the issue of homelessness.

Homeless people in Hamburg

To start off my research, it was necessary to get an overview of the situation of homeless people in Hamburg. Rather than solely looking at statistics and numbers, I sought to learn more about the lives of the homeless from someone who has first-hand experience in working with them. Therefore, in early

June, I contacted the Hamburg street magazine „Hinz & Kunzt“ and made an appointment for an interview with the social worker, Stephan Karrenbauer.¹

“Hinz & Kunzt” was founded in 1993 as a cooperation of some homeless people and journalists. The magazine is written and produced by journalists and graphic designers, and then sold by the homeless. Through selling the paper, the homeless do not only receive the bigger part of the money they charge for the magazine, but they also regain their dignity and can feel more as a part of the general society. The articles in the magazine are usually focusing on social issues in and around Hamburg, they shed light on homeless and poor people and on their struggle for making a living. As such, “Hinz & Kunzt” is supposed to be an important, socially committed voice of the city. The influence and the circulation of the magazine have grown significantly since its foundation: while the first edition was printed and sold 30,000 times, the monthly average is now at 64,000 units, which makes it the most widely circulated street paper in German speaking countries.²

But “Hinz & Kunzt” is not just a magazine that homeless people can sell and make money from, it is also a physical space where they can get help. The magazine employs two social workers who support the homeless in various ways, e.g. by helping them find an apartment or a place to sleep, by connecting them with other institutions and organisations, and by advising them on drug addiction problems. The social workers also accompany homeless to other services, e.g. the job centre or drug advice centres. Last but not least, they are interlocutors who listen to the stories that homeless people have to tell.³ Stephan Karrenbauer has been working for “Hinz und Kunzt” since 1995 and has an extensive knowledge about homelessness in Hamburg.

During my interview with him, the first thing I learned was that there are two kinds of people: those who accept that they are homeless and are willing to live openly on the streets; and the bigger group that is mostly invisible because they sleep in hidden places, which they go to at night and leave again early in the morning. The second group will thus only become visible in the day rooms, where they are provided with food and shelter. Respecting their decision to stay mostly hidden and not invading their privacy when they want to be left alone, I decided to focus my research on the first group. Hence, my results are certainly biased as they do not represent the homeless in Hamburg in their entirety, but only the more prominent and visible part.

The fact that a lot of homeless people are ashamed of their fate and want to stay hidden also makes it hard to estimate the overall number of homeless people in Hamburg. Moreover, there reportedly is a large number of people who stay at their friends homes, and especially women who can stay at a

1 Stephan Karrenbauer has also been a main source and starting point for the research of Waltraud Kokot and, subsequently, Martin Gruber’s further research. (Gruber, 2005: 45)

2 <http://www.hinzundkunzt.de/das-magazin/fakten/>

3 <http://www.hinzundkunzt.de/projekt/sozialarbeit/>

man's apartment in exchange for certain, often sexual, services. Those people are seldom registered anywhere and therefore do not appear in any statistics. At the time of my research, approximately 2,000 homeless people were estimated to live in Hamburg. The biggest group of them is between 30 and 40 years of age, but the tendency is towards a decrease in age.

Apart from "Hinz & Kunzt", there is a variety of organisations and groups that provide help and assistance for the homeless. Among others, soup kitchens give out food at different locations throughout the city, medical buses provide basic health care, a few medical practitioners take in people without health insurance, and some places distribute clothes. In the city centre one may find a few places where to have a shower, but all in all there are only eight free and openly accessible showers for all the homeless, so there is normally a long queue. Arguably, however, what is missing the most are shelters and homes for the people, because this is at the root of the whole problem.

There is a big misconception among Germans that no-one has to sleep in the streets, and that the state is legally obliged to provide a home for everyone. While it is true that the state is supposed to provide shelter at least for all individuals with German citizenship, there just are not enough rooms and apartments to fulfil that promise. It is, therefore, wrong to assume that homeless people in Hamburg are voluntarily living on the streets. In winter, as I was told by Stephan Karrenbauer, the homeless normally receive more money while begging, but especially during the summer months sympathy for homeless people is quite low.

In fact, in one aspect the warmer summer nights are not much different from cold winter nights. Homeless people always have to be alert, so they can hardly ever sleep peacefully, missing a sufficient amount of deep sleep. They are afraid of being robbed of their few possessions or even attacked physically. This again results in permanent psychological stress. Apart from that, mental illnesses such as depression are common among homeless. Even minor health problems, such as a cold, can be dangerous to homeless people, since they cannot just go to bed, take some medicine and rest until they feel better. If they cannot find a proper place to sleep, they are constantly exposed to different weather conditions. All those reasons, combined with alcohol and drug consumption, which for many provides the only relief from stress, explain the average life expectancy of only 47 years of age among homeless people. (Interview with Stephan Karrenbauer; 06.11.2015)⁴

At the time of my fieldwork in June 2015, the situation for the homeless seemed to get even worse, since it was announced that the biggest shelter, the "Winternotprogramm" (winter emergency programme), would be shut down. Last winter (2014-2015) it provided shelter for up to 926 people in various

4 For more information about the medical situation of the homeless, see also: <http://www.welt.de/regionales/hamburg/article123948693/Lebenserwartung-bei-Obdachlosen-unter-47-Jahren.html>

locations.⁵ One of the locations was converted into a refugee home. It came as a relief when the city authorities announced that they would again provide up to 850 beds from November 1 until March 31.⁶ But even the 926 places in winter 2014-15 had not been enough to house all those in need. Another shelter, “Pik As”, expanded its capacity from 210 to 260 beds, and then again to 400. But even after this enlargement “Pik As” had to decline entry to up to ten people a day because all rooms were overcrowded. Normally “Pik As” would be the last option to go to, for its reputation among the homeless is quite bad. To put it shortly, the “Winternotprogramm” and the “Pik As” were fully occupied until the very last day they offered shelter, even though this last winter had not been a harsh one. All this illustrates the crucial importance of the city authority’s measures.⁷

Research process and experiences

It was when the “Winternotprogramm” closed its doors on 31 March, 2015 that the homeless became publicly visible again on the streets of Hamburg. Especially the busy shopping streets around Mönckebergstraße and Jungfernstieg were suddenly populated by numerous homeless people begging for money. Having said that, it was not in spring but already in winter 2014 that I became strongly aware of the homeless in Hamburg. I worked at a support centre for immigrants and refugees called “Café Exil”, which is located right next to one of the houses of the “Winternotprogramm”. Since the “Winternotprogramm” closed every morning at 8 am, a lot of homeless people visited us to warm up and drink coffee, and with much reluctance we often had to ask them to leave because our space was limited and we could not harbour them.

The social worker at “Hinz & Kunzt” described homelessness as something that can just happen to people: The older people get, the more they are likely to experience difficulties and crises, and if they then get depressed and something unexpected happens, this might just be the literal straw that breaks the camel’s back.

Surely, empathy exerts an influence on the research process. In my case, it made the research “slower”, more intensive, and more of a personal experience. Instead of “ticking off” the questions from my list and then moving on to another person or group, I would stay with one group for more than one or two hours. This, in combination with it being my first field research,

5 <http://www.hamburg.de/winternotprogramm-obdachlose/nofl/4474546/2015-03-31-basfi-ende-winternotprogramm/>

6 <http://www.hamburg.de/obdachlosigkeit/nofl/4595120/2015-09-02-basfi-winternotprogramm-planung/>

7 Lobao and Murray (2005) offer an analysis of the shelter system of Columbus, Ohio, by means of geographical spatial data, which might also be used to improve the availability and accessibility of shelters in Hamburg.

made me feel as if the time frame within the seminar was very short. Still, I was able to gain an insight into individual life worlds of homeless, which ultimately helped me to understand how they use the space in the city centre of Hamburg.

Before I move further into my personal experiences during my fieldwork, I will introduce the research design and methods that Claryce Lum and I developed prior to our fieldwork. Our first plan was to start by interviewing employees of the street magazines “Hinz & Kunzt” and “Straßenfeger” or “Motz”, and through them possibly get in touch with homeless people who would not mind talking to us. We generated a questionnaire together, so we could afterwards compare the answers and already find commonalities and differences in the two cities. In the questionnaire we were focussing on three aspects: economic factors, power structures and prejudice from non-homeless, that we thought would mainly influence their choice of location. During the interviews we then wanted to deepen our understanding of how homeless people use the city spaces available to them. Another method I used was observation in the streets, mainly in the city centre of Hamburg. During my research I went there at different times and days at least twice a week. For more than one hour I would sit on a bench or walk around and watch people and their activities.

Because of the language barrier, Claryce had to change her methods and, instead of interviewing homeless people directly, found an organisation called “Querstadtein”, where ex-homeless people show both tourists and locals “their Berlin” and the places where they used to stay. Claryce went on two tours with two different guides, while I interviewed one of the social workers of “Hinz & Kunzt” and talked to two groups of homeless people. But through the different methods, the research of one complemented the other’s findings. We stayed in touch through the whole process, shared insights and hints as well as different perspectives and provided each other with moral support. At the end of the seminar, we jointly presented our findings to the other participants of the seminar. For me, however, the seminar and the fieldwork were not only about the results, but also about practising field research methods. As I had never conducted fieldwork before, entering an arguably difficult field initially was a challenge. I am very glad to have had the opportunity in this seminar to try out a very interesting and, at the same time, challenging research. I gained practical experience conducting research and in testing various ethnographic methods, changing my approach in the process and adapting it to fit a difficult field. Through the co-operation with Claryce Lum I also discovered the benefits of working together with a partner on the same or a similar project (cf. Lum, this issue).

Prior to my first research experience, I spent much time thinking of how to approach my interviewees and what to give them so I would not just use them as subjects for my study. I later noticed that no-one else was doing any-

thing similar for their research or for an interview. Even though we were discussing the possibility and normality of giving someone chocolate for or after an interview, it appeared I was the only one trying to give something back in that way. One could argue that the homeless as a marginalized group are different from non-homeless and more in need of support and that they would, therefore, appreciate food as an act of kindness. At the other hand, handing over food can also produce the effect of belittling the interlocutor. In hindsight, I may have tried too hard to think ahead and prepare my entrée properly. It only occurred to me after the primary encounters that the greatest gift was not food or cigarettes but respect and time to listen to their stories.

With each group I spent more than two hours; we did not just talk about their use of space but also about homelessness in general, their lives, current events, and future plans. As a side effect, whenever in the following days I would see any of them in the city, we would greet each other. With Ben I talked on several occasions after the first day I met him and his group; he would sit somewhere on one and the same street and beg with his hat, and when I walked past and saw him, I went to sit down with him for a while.

I already briefly described my inability to be objective about the people I met, and my emotional involvement with them. When I met the second group and accompanied them to their sleeping place, I felt very reluctant to leave. It was a cold and rainy day for June and I actually got sick after staying outside for that long, but I just did not want to leave. To me it felt like abandoning them. I could go “home”, whereas they could not. Even though knowing that I am not the cause of their circumstances, a subtle feeling of guilt remained.⁸

During this time, the structure of the seminar, especially the buddy system, was of great help. Even though Claryce Lum did not directly interview currently homeless people but went on city walks guided by formerly homeless people instead, she was also invested in the topic so she understood my concerns better than others. We frequently updated each other about our progress, the methods we used, and our findings. We would then go on to compare our different findings, also complementing each others approaches or asking questions about particular aspects that came up during our individual researches. Being in a team for this research was very important for me, for the emotional support as well as for the research process.

Another important factor in my role as a researcher was that I did not always make it clear that I was in fact conducting a study with the intent to use the material for a paper or for publication. In my request for an interview to “Hinz & Kunzt” I did introduce myself and my role was clear. In the streets, however, especially because of the fluctuation of people in the second group, I was probably perceived as just a guest. I missed the opportunity to make my

8 Gruber describes a very similar feeling to mine when he first enters the field in the chapter “Einblicke in eine Parallelwelt” (Insight into a parallel world) (Kokot 2004).

intentions clear and explain that I was there to research one certain aspect of their lives. That is also the reason why some of the group members were wondering that a non-homeless person was talking to them, which rarely ever happens. My empathy (or lack of distance) may ultimately have been somehow misleading from my interlocutors' point of view. In a future research I would definitely try to introduce myself and always be clear about my role as a researcher. However, I think this is not just a problem that I was facing in this particular fieldwork context, but a general challenge in dynamic settings, where people frequently come and go.

The findings I will now present in the following two sections originate from my interview with Stephan Karrenbauer, the talks with the two groups of homeless, my exchange with Claryce Lum and my observations on the streets of Hamburg in June 2015. Beginning in the next section, I will describe how I approached homeless people and portray the two groups I met during my research.

Groups: segregation and solidarity

The first idea was to initiate contact with homeless people at the office of „Hinz & Kunzt“. Yet it proved less easy than expected to get in contact with street-paper vendors inside the building. Most of them just stayed inside for a short break, to eat and drink something and then go back out to selling the magazine. While working, they are focussed on their job, so disturbing them for a longer period of time was not advisable. Thus it became the social worker I turned to. He told me that a lot of homeless people on the streets are not easily distinguished from non-homeless, until the shops close:

“It is really very depressing when you walk around in the city centre around 9 pm, when the city centre starts emptying out and certain people just remain. Then it becomes apparent how many people just don't have a home and don't know where to go [...]” (Interview with Stephan Karrenbauer; 06.11.2015. transl: Natascha Bregy)

So after most of the shops close at 8 pm, more and more people would go home and the city centre would slowly become deserted – apart from the people who have no home to go to. Therefore, the social worker suggested I just go to the city centre after 9 pm and talk to the people who would then

9 Original quote: “Es ist einfach ein ganz düsteres Bild, wenn man in der Innenstadt so um 21 Uhr ist, wenn sich die Innenstadt leert und es bleiben bestimmte Leute einfach stehen. Dann wird einem erst deutlich, wie viele Leute nämlich kein Zuhause haben und gar nicht wissen wo sie eigentlich hin sollen [...]”

be building their night places.¹⁰ Between 9 and 10, most people would still be awake and there would be less passers-by, resulting in a quieter atmosphere.

During the seminar, we discussed ways of giving something back to the people we research. Especially in my research with a strongly marginalized group, I felt the need to give something back and not just go about my research, write a paper and get my personal recognition for it. The first idea was to give away cigarettes or tobacco. Additionally, we came up with the idea of giving away food like apples or chocolate bars. I did in fact buy all those things before I went out the first time, although ultimately I did not use any of them in the end.

So one evening in mid-June when the shops were just about to close, I went to a downtown street with a bag filled with apples, chocolate bars and a pack of cigarettes. Coincidentally, a piece of paper, coming from the place where two young homeless women were begging, was carried away by the wind. I picked it up and asked one of the two if it belonged to them, which it did not. I then realised that the paper was in fact a menu from a near-by restaurant, but anyhow, a start was made. This is how I came in contact with the first group of homeless people, which I will now briefly introduce.

The two women I encountered were very young; one of them probably 18, the other perhaps 25 years old. The younger one had arrived in Hamburg at the beginning of the summer and had become homeless only recently. The older one had a large dog that only listened to her command and, because she had been attacked by another dog some time before, barked at every dog that came close to her. This latter woman had just recently come to Hamburg from another major city and had been travelling around Germany for some years. A bit later, two men joined the group. They had been at the shopping mall charging their smartphones during the time I met the two women. When they appeared, the women mentioned that each of them belonged to one of the men, which to me seemed to be one way of protecting them from other men on the streets. The older of the two men – he was already in his thirties – turned out to be the leader of the group and his words mostly ended every discussion, whether it be about the place to stay for the night or about the distribution of cigarettes and alcohol. He told me that he had been living on the streets of Hamburg for over 10 years and now knows each and everyone as well as the best places to be in the city. It was probably this knowledge that made him the leader of an otherwise very young (and probably inexperienced) group. The last member of the group, a young man of around 25 years of age, mostly remained silent.

The four of them shared a shopping cart in which they stored, among other things, beer, some dog food, blankets and sleeping bags. They were

10 In German, this is referred to as “Platte machen”. Platte is the place where homeless stay, it can be a night place but also a place where the homeless stay during the day.

begging for money with a self-made device – a cup connected with a string to a long stick, resembling a fishing pole. According to them, to be successful one had to come up with new creative ways to beg every once in a while. After I started talking to the women, I was asked by them to put some money in the cup, which I did. While asking about their life on the street, they mostly referred to it as being fun and adventurous. Their leader was a bit more cautious and also talked about the winters being harsh. The younger woman told me that she will probably rent a room just for the winter, so I assumed she still received some monetary support to afford a room, or just does not yet realise the difficulties of living on the street and being homeless. All in all, this group seemed very carefree and happy, and they hardly talked about hardships and problems that come along with being homeless.

The encounter with the second group happened two days later. It was again shortly before the shops closed when I exited a shopping mall and saw a man around the age of 35 sitting on a bench begging, a hat put in front of him. I went to him and asked in German if it would be okay to sit next to him for a while and ask him some questions. But he did not understand and asked if I could speak English. I proceeded to ask him the same questions in English and he invited me to sit next to him however long I would want. The ensuing conversation with him and his friends happened alternately in English or German, depending on his presence and participation in the conversation.

After sitting on the bench with my initial acquaintance for a while, another man joined us and together we went to a spot where Caritas – the charity organisation of the Roman Catholic Church – distributes food to people in need. There were about 30 to 40 people already waiting, and as soon as the Caritas vehicles arrived everyone neatly lined up in a queue to receive their share. Apart from the main course people also received one piece of fruit, cake, and pudding which the group then shared or exchanged. While eating there was a lot of chatter and small talk, and people enquired about each other's well-being and activities. It was during the meal that the third member from their *Platte*¹¹ joined us. After a while the people dispersed again and I accompanied the group to their sleeping place. There I met the last member of the group, an older woman who just recently joined the *Platte*.

While there are four people in this group, I mainly spoke to the two first men I had met. Therefore, I will focus my introduction on the two of them. The man I met on the bench, Ben¹², told me he had been living in the United Kingdom for eight years before coming to Hamburg to look for work. In a strange set of events the room he rented turned out to be a fraud and with no money to return to Britain he ended up on the streets of Hamburg. He told

11 “Platte” on one hand refers to the sleeping place of the homeless, “Platte machen” on the other hand generally means that someone is sleeping on the streets, being homeless.

12 Name has been changed by the author.

me he had just recently come to Hamburg, though his friend later mentioned that he has been trying to save enough money for his flight back to Britain for the last six months. Since he is not eligible for social benefits in Germany, he needs most of the money he scrounges for purchasing daily necessities. He was very open about his feelings and mental struggles that life on the street entails.

The second man I encountered, Jens¹³, was about 40 years old, very well-groomed and it took me a while to notice that he was actually also homeless. He became homeless about three months prior to our encounter and he was very confident that he would get a job and an apartment before the winter. He had a soft temper, was always very thoughtful and considerate when I asked questions. Because of his pensive and amicable attitude, I completely believed him when he said he would stop being homeless very soon. He can be seen as the “founder” of this group, being the first who stayed and slept at this spot and then taking in the others one by one.

I stayed with those two and the group until very late and gained a very differentiated insight into life on the streets. They knew the group I had met before and also knew of their careless mindset. They told me that those others would usually get drunk and sometimes be quite noisy in the evening. As it happened, the sleeping place of the first group was near enough, so one could sometimes see and hear them while we were talking. Generally, they would ignore the other group and just leave them alone. As an example of how this second group deals with confrontations with other homeless people, there was an instance when Jens had to ask someone to leave the group because while being drunk this person misbehaved towards other members of the group. Coincidentally, this person would sometimes hang out with the first group, as in fact it happened to be the case while I was talking to the second group. Seemingly, neither party held a grudge.

Contrary to what the social worker at “Hinz & Kunzt” told me, I witnessed a lot of solidarity among the homeless. Certainly these acts are mostly quite small, like giving away or sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, but also taking in people that are on their own seems not unusual. The tour guides Claryce Lum engaged with also mentioned solidarity and being in a group as a way of protection against attackers and thieves. This observation can certainly also be applied to Hamburg. As regards solidarity of non-homeless towards homeless people, the support is rarely direct but usually mediated through charities or other welfare organisations. Both groups were wondering why I would talk to them and told me that even people who give them money never speak to them. Therefore, homeless people do build their own group which exists within society but is, at the same time, segregated from it.

13 Name changed

Use of Space in the city centre of Hamburg

Generally, one can discern big differences between night and day, as well as between seasons. The four aspects that I could identify during my research as the most important ones for the choice of places by the homeless were: economic resources, protection, participation and group dynamic. The four aspects are mostly intertwined, they acquire higher or lesser importance depending on the situation. Group dynamic is important in almost every situation since most homeless participate in a group and partly know other homeless people who do not belong to their group.

In winter, the amount of homeless people on the streets is much lower than in summer. This is not only due to the shelters around the city that only open in winter, but also because many homeless people try to sleep at a friend's places during the night. When temperatures drop below zero, even the place with good protection from wind and rain are too cold to stay. From spring on, however, the streets are being filled with homeless people. To me, this was especially conspicuous when walking through the shopping areas of central Hamburg on a Saturday afternoon. Every few metres, someone was sitting with a cup, a hat or some other container to put money in. Apart from these, there were people walking around addressing passers-by directly and asking for money, although not all of them are necessarily homeless.

For economic reasons it is common for the homeless to spend their day at a more crowded place, and then move in the evening. The first group I met was always staying at different places: if a site did not prove to be profitable enough, they would try to find a better one for the remainder of the day. They had their belongings in a shopping cart and would mostly stay together during the day. The second group would split up in the morning and only reunite in the afternoon or evening. Jens was selling "Hinz & Kunzt" magazines in the centre, while Ben was begging, usually called "*Sitzung machen*". Both activities are equally considered work, since they provide (additional) money. Every evening, when the shops were about to close, the two would stop working¹⁴ and go to the food distribution before they move to their sleeping place.

During bad weather most homeless do not stay outside and seek shelter from rain and wind, so the economic aspect takes a back seat, while protection becomes more important. Apart from the day shelters malls function as shelters for the homeless. There, people can hang out without necessarily being identified as homeless. The men of the first group did not only go there

14 See for additional information: Kokot (2004) has a whole chapter about work ("Arbeit").

to buy beer, but also to charge their phones.¹⁵ Then there are bridges or places underneath, which, quite contrary to Berlin, are easily accessible and the police mostly leaves homeless people in peace. Apart from that, homeless people use abandoned buildings around town, or they get on the underground and just travel around for hours. The underground is sometimes also used for shelter during the night and in winter, especially during the weekends when the underground operates throughout the night.

However, most homeless cannot afford to pay for the underground, so they get in trouble if they are caught. For Ben, the inability to travel by bus or underground was one of the main reasons to stay downtown. As most organisations supporting the homeless are located in the city centre, he needed to be there during the day; for the night he would have liked to go to the suburbs. He ended up staying in the city centre because access to these organisations and the economic benefits were more important.

One of the biggest differences between Berlin and Hamburg concerning the city centre was that there seemed to be some kind of symbiosis occurring in Hamburg. While measures to keep the homeless away were installed in many parts of Berlin, the shop owners in the central parts of Hamburg tolerated them for the most part. The city centre is not only popular during the day but also at night. After 9 pm, the streets are quiet and there are almost no passers-by – unlike in St. Pauli (cf. Lunca, this issue). Because of a higher police presence downtown, some people feel more protected against possible violent attacks. Again, the police do not drive the homeless off. Perhaps their presence can be seen as an additional layer of security, which helps to prevent the shops from being robbed. Additionally, they tidy the places where they sleep since it is their “living space”.

Mostly, people would stay at the same “Platte” for a longer period of time, so the above description of these places as living space is not far fetched. The social worker at “Hinz & Kunzt” told me of fights and arguments between homeless about sleeping places. During my research it seemed like the boundaries between different groups had been set and everyone knew their place. The rules of the streets can be tough and being the first at a certain place does not guarantee a place. Being in a group, therefore, is not only functional in terms of social interaction, but a necessity for protection – and sometimes for defending a place against other groups. Jens, who first occupied the space the group used for sleeping, was very aware of that fact and thus relieved when there was no hard feelings after someone left the group.

15 Neither Kokot's, nor Gruber's research revealed any information about the importance or the usage of phones. The main group in their research always met at the same cabin in the centre, even after some of them found a flat and work, therefore they did not need phones to meet or stay in touch. During the short time I talked to the group, it appeared to me that this group was also not using the phones to communicate, but rather to play games as a pastime.

What surprised me most during my research was the aspect of participants. Of course, homeless people need communication and social interactions, as do all human beings. I mentioned before that the shopping malls are places where homeless people are not easily identified as such. There, they may behave and feel like everyone else. When I asked the two women in the first group if they do not feel bothered by people looking at them, they denied. On the contrary, they stated they need to be in public places with lots of busy people, because that makes them feel like part of society. Even though they were clearly identifiable as homeless, being immersed in the bustling city life offered a sense of belonging. For this group, the anonymous urban crowd did not make them feel awkward being looked at or judged, but more “normal” and as part of the city’s everyday-life scenery.

Conclusion

Generally, the results of this short-term research coincide with the previous findings of Waltraud Kokot and her team, as well as Martin Gruber’s thesis. One of the conclusions of their research was that homeless people are specialists for the survival in the city, deserving respect for their way of living and their culture-specific rules (Kokot 2004: 65). I do agree with this group’s findings and see certain strategies which the homeless develop in order to survive on the streets. Their habits and the use of space are adapted to the city centre of Hamburg. They know exactly where they can obtain food, clothes, money and temporary shelter. In that regard homeless people certainly constitute a (sub)culture, created by the necessity to survive on the streets.

The homeless use the city centre during the day to make money, be it through begging, selling the “Hinz & Kunzt” street magazine, or other options. At the same time, the bustling streets give them a sense of belonging to society and being (almost) like everyone else – the same feeling they can achieve if they spend their day at one of the malls, which come to serve as the biggest shelter at times of bad weather. During the night, when the shops are closed, the entrance areas turn into sleeping places for small groups of homeless people. When they have to leave again early in the morning, the cycle begins anew and the homeless go looking for the best places to stay during the day, lest someone else had already claimed them. Violence also occurs among the homeless when individual people or groups are competing for the same space; in these arguments, however, people usually seem to just go their separate ways.

Since I finished my research, major shifts have happened in Europe. The refugee crisis has been a daily topic in the news and we get to see racism along with welcoming acts of friendship. In this discussion, numerous negative comments in Germany were directed at the state, purportedly not being able to care for its own citizens while trying to take in many more “foreign”

people. Similar comments were made when the “Winternotquartier” was closed and transformed into a refugee asylum. Homelessness has been present in Hamburg for such a long time that it has become normal for people to see the homeless begging in the streets; but suddenly homeless people are being utilised as an argument against another marginalised group. The homeless should not be forgotten during this time, but neither should they have to compete with refugees for public attention. As Gruber (2005: 79-80) also mentions in his outlook, what is needed is not just a discussion about one or the other marginalised group, but a broader discussion about poverty and how society should deal with changing economic circumstances and the fact that technological advances will continue to widen the gap between available workforce and the workforce actually needed by the economy; in due time, we might be looking at the majority of the population as marginalised groups simply because technological advances have replaced their purpose within the workforce.

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