

# Hot Tea, Dry Toast and the Responsibilisation of Homeless People

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*This article sets out to critically explore the expanding and contested vocabulary of 'responsible citizenship' as it relates to homeless people in a small market town in rural Dorset. Taking as its reference point the controversial decision to introduce a payment system for hot food at a day-centre for rough sleepers, I offer a concrete illustration of how the desire to cultivate 'active' and 'responsible' citizens is experienced and perceived by people who are affected by homelessness and other dimensions of 'deep' social exclusion. My concern here is to show that the logic of 'responsibilisation', which I suggest aims to ensure that difficult and troublesome individuals are made to accept prevailing social norms, draws its sustenance from a more fundamental concern with refashioning the meaning of contemporary citizenship. In so doing, I focus on the particular problems with this approach, using an alternative approach that argues that the problems and vulnerabilities associated with entrenched and chronic homelessness remain a significant obstacle to social inclusion and meaningful participation in community life.*

## Introduction

The reason for charging for food is not to raise revenue but to instil a sense of responsibility among service users for their own welfare. Those not in receipt of state benefits or who are otherwise in financial difficulties – e.g. if a substantial reduction is being made from benefits – will not be charged for the meal (Day-centre policy statement).

Responsible citizenship has become a central and defining concept that seemingly spans the New Labour and New Tory political divide (Ferguson, 2008). This surge of interest in responsibilisation has recently been expressed in policy initiatives, which cut across the domains of social welfare, civic engagement and community cohesion. In terms of New Labour, this policy focus has become most closely associated with Caroline Flint, the former Minister of State for Housing and Planning, in respect of the much publicised and widely ridiculed suggestion that social housing tenants should be corralled into accepting 'commitment contracts' as a precondition to entry into a 'something for something culture' (Wintour, 2008). At the same time, David Cameron the Conservative Party leader, emboldened by a moribund Labour administration has called for a 'responsibility revolution' to counter the erosion of personal responsibility and the rise of anti-social behaviour (BBC, 2007). In essence, as scholars like Lund (1999: 450) and Dwyer (1998) have argued, the norm of reciprocity is a policy trope and intellectual concern that has antecedents in the era of the 'progressive alliance' between New Liberals, Christian Socialists and elements of Fabianism and as a feature

of the Major administrations conception of the 'active citizen'. What is important to recognise is that the rearticulation of 'responsible citizenship' has entered the lexicon of mainstream political and academic discourse alongside other such discursive formations as 'community governance' and 'social inclusion', both of which are viewed as key organising principles in the drive to enable communities to take responsibility for their own welfare (Mooney and Fyfe, 2006).

Before going any further, however, it is useful to consider how the idea of responsible citizenship interweaves moral authoritarianism with neo-liberal politics in the social field. This is important because responsible citizens make reasonable choices – and therefore 'bad choices' result from the wilfulness of irresponsible people, rather than the structural distribution of resources, capacities and opportunities (Clarke, 2005: 451).

In discussing the principles of responsible citizenship it is important to understand that in a political context increasingly shaped by the shift away from left–right divisions and towards a neo-liberal orthodoxy, responsibilities rather than rights lie at the heart of the dominant paradigm of social citizenship. One of the key assumptions of this growing consensus is that there is a contemporary deficit of responsibility and obligation. Inevitably, this has given rise to a proliferation of social policy initiatives that encourage individual, family or community 'responsibilities' and forms of self-sufficiency (Carey, 2008: 931). This has involved, most spectacularly and contentiously, the Respect and Responsibility White Paper (2003).

In describing the rise of the vocabulary of responsible citizenship, Orton (2004) has emphasised how talk of generating personal responsibility is presented as a cure-all within mainstream political and social policy debates to the perceived break up of 'community' and the increasingly atomised individualism with contemporary society. Alongside this, Mooney and Fyfe (2006) have noted that for New Labour the development of 'cohesive' and 'sustainable' communities are viewed as key components in enhancing citizenship and building a socially inclusive society. In which case, the relationship between community, personal responsibility and citizenship is held to be contiguous. It therefore follows that the 'local community' – regarded as a complex and dynamic socio-spatial entity – becomes the guiding fulcrum in bringing about cultural shifts that seek to recode social conduct.

Sociological research into responsible citizenship has tended to adopt the insights of governmentality, as derived from the work of Michel Foucault (2003), as an explanatory tool for grasping the complex and sophisticated processes by which formal and informal mechanisms of social control regulate human conduct towards particular ends (McIntyre and McKee, 2008). Work in this field has focused specifically on the idea that the failure to conform to 'good' and 'acceptable' standards of behaviour has given rise to a stronger, more robust and punitive form of contractual governance and welfare conditionality (Rose, 2001; Nixon *et al.*, 2007; Moore, 2008). Flint, for example, has observed that in this new politics of conduct 'the capacity and behaviour of individuals are observed and classified in a framework that explicitly links conduct to moral judgements of character' (2006: 20).

It should also be recognised, however, that the vocabulary of responsible citizenship is also entirely congruent with a materialist critique of the strong neo-liberal undercurrents of New Labour's welfare strategy. In this reframing of citizenship, consumerist and market-based approaches are prescribed so as to enable citizens to secure their own welfare (Paddison *et al.*, 2008). Under this approach, the role of the state is about creating

the conditions for active and independent citizens. The neo-liberal imperatives of New Labour have given rise to a policy vocabulary that increasingly emphasises the principles of individual responsibility and the idea of social inclusion through paid employment (MacLeavy, 2008). Given this context, the Marxist political theorist Alex Callinicos has noted:

There is ... an important sense in which New Labour authoritarianism is a consequence of Gordon Brown's version of neo-liberal economics. Unemployment in these circumstances is a consequence of dysfunctional behaviour of individuals who refuse to work, and this behaviour must in turn be caused either by their individual moral faults or by a more pervasive 'culture of poverty'. (2001: 62)

This awareness, however, does not detract from the point that the aggressive and pervasive mobilisation of the vocabulary of responsible citizenship reflects a desire to reconfigure citizenship. The consequence of this approach for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in society is far reaching. Such a conception of citizenship has, moreover, led some to favour the term 'discipline' over 'responsibility'. This shift is well-observed by Paddison *et al.*:

Whilst not denying its disciplinary intent, the rhetorical emphasis on responsibility is also important in defining the assumed shift in the contract between the citizen and the state. Thus, 'responsible participation' requires welfare recipients to engage 'in the active management of their lives' and is portrayed as 'empowerment'. (2008: 131)

Much has been written about the communitarian strand of responsible citizenship pioneered by New Labour. Indeed, as work by White (2003) and Pawson and Davidson (2008) suggests, the moral economy of New Labour presents an interpretation of citizenship where access to certain services should be earned, rather than made available by right. In mobilising the basic principles of responsible citizenship, a significant body of work has arisen in respect of the housing–welfare state relationship and anti-social and irresponsible behaviour. However, the impact of responsible citizenship on homeless people has been discussed only indirectly with the exception of Fitzpatrick and Jones (2005) and Whiteford (2008). In this, for instance, it is not hard to detect a contradictory mix of interventions designed to tackle the social exclusion of homelessness alongside efforts that seek to remove rough sleepers from public spaces and deter street culture activities with a view to engendering moral and behavioural improvement.

Extending our focus, it is possible to identify some of the ways in which the current focus on responsible citizenship has been translated into the realm of homelessness policy and practice. There are two interesting axes to this. The former is identifiable in the way in which access to homelessness service and housing advice is increasingly dependant on compliance with work-plans, sobriety requirements and conduct agreements (see Phelan and Norris, 2008 for an exegesis). The latter is identifiable in the growing concern with providing homeless people with meaningful activity. Here meaningful activity is said to be any form of social or cultural activity that purposefully aims to empower people experiencing homelessness to build self-esteem, develop skills and reconnect with mainstream social networks (Homeless Link, 2006).

In passing, we might also wish to note the constant challenges faced by homelessness charities and organisations reliant on external funding, voluntary support and the regulatory oversight of the ever-encroaching 'shadow state' (Wolch, 1989; Whiteford, 2007, 2009). Geoffrey DeVerteuil (2006) has described, for example, how the homelessness sector, specifically night-shelters and day centres, are designed to ensure the social order through regulating homeless people. In shorthand, this is to view homelessness service providers (both statutory and voluntary) as institutions that seek to contain, conceal and manage homeless people. For DeVerteuil, homeless day centres are crisis driven and, thus, have only limited abilities to 'solve' the problems that homeless people face. By way of contrast, Dean *et al.* (2000) and others maintain that the homelessness sector aims to enhance the wider project of citizenship by enhancing users' access to the resources, rights, goods and services that encourage social inclusion and justice.

Building on this political rationality, homelessness charities and organisations have enthusiastically promoted access to education, training or employment as key drivers in enabling people to move off the streets and towards social inclusion (Singh, 2005). Yet, responsible citizenship, as I will demonstrate below consists of more than simply a concern with targeting the multiple barriers that homeless people face in trying to access sustainable employment. Indeed, as I hope to illustrate, the net of responsabilisation has been cast wider so as to frame debates about the efficacy and equability of charging rough sleepers for a hot meal. Through this, and other similar innovations, homeless people are being responsibilised.

### **Manufacturing responsibility**

Homeless people are not the [day-centre's] sole responsibility – they are the whole of the community's responsibility. We do not accept that we are responsible for our attendees' total behaviour when they are not with us (Trustee).

At first sight, it might appear that the decision to ask people experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness to pay for a hot meal has little, if any, direct sociological significance. However, I want to suggest that there are three distinct, yet overlapping reasons, why this specific case example is deserving of critical attention. First, it reveals the elasticity of the term 'responsible citizenship'. Second, it provides a concrete illustration of how 'community' can be reimagined as a mechanism for social control, and a vehicle for disciplining and regulating behaviour (Ferguson, 2008: 44). In the third and final place, my ethnographic example critically undermines the morally suspect and empirically unsubstantiated assumption that there is a clear division of values and norms of conduct between homeless people and the wider 'settled society'. Instead, my research findings do not provide evidence to support this contention. To put this in perspective, people who sleep rough in rural Dorset display a variety of responses to the profound and pervasive paradigm of responsible citizenship. The point here is that people experiencing homelessness resist the application of representations which cast them as 'irresponsible', 'parasitic' or part of the 'passive poor'. This, in turn, problematises the discursive and policy basis on which the notion of responsible citizenship is structured by drawing attention to a more socially variegated landscape; one that is sensitive to the confluence of material disadvantage, external labelling and the voice of people who are themselves homeless (Howe, 1998).

## **Methodology**

The substantive discussion that follows draws extensively on a doctoral research project that set out to understand how citizenship gets reworked on the street, both in what people say and what people do (Gowan, 2002) via extended participant observation and exploratory interviews. As part of my research, I sought to ask homeless people questions about how they understand and, in some cases, experience new institutional arrangements and discursive claims that place particular emphasis on rights and responsibilities. My fieldwork would seem to suggest that the 'responsibilisation' thesis has developed in two significant (albeit different) ways in relation to the rough sleeping community. A focus on anti-social behaviour represents the first strand of this movement towards enforcing 'responsible citizenship', while a critical corollary is apparent in the 'enforced' decision taken by the day-centre to introduce a payment system for its lunchtime meal provision.

My principal research site is a voluntary day-centre for rough sleepers, wayfarers (men of the road) and those who have been resettled in a small market town in Dorset. It emerged in response to the death of a rough sleeper in a public toilet from hypothermia in 1999 when a small cadre of 'serial volunteers' and community activists mobilised in order to meet (however imperfectly) the immediate and identified needs of 'local' rough sleepers. In common with the majority of emergency services for homeless people, it is financially dependent on statutory funding, very modest charitable grants and small acts of private philanthropy (see, for example, Johnsen *et al.*, 2005). Organisationally, it is underpinned by a strong and clear Christian ethos, which, in turn, promotes and privileges the moral imperatives of caring for others and social justice (Clope *et al.*, 2005). Such philanthropic efforts have, in time, enabled the day-centre to become the focal point for targeted housing, health and other ancillary services. Notwithstanding some important and significant developments in recent years, there is a clear recognition that the extent and nature of support services for homeless people in rural Dorset is disjointed and incomplete.

In focusing on the controversial and contested question of charging service users for a hot meal, I am strongly influenced by the arguments of Mitchell Duneier (2002: 1551) about the importance of moving beyond 'homeless places' in order to focus on how statutory organisations and community institutions, which are actively tasked with the promotion of 'behavioural changing' policies, can affect the micro-settings under investigation. In this spirit, I have for example carried out interviews and 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984: 102) with serving police officers, police community support officers, local housing authority officials, street outreach workers, health care professionals, parish councillors and a community news reporter. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Moreover, as a complement to this approach I have also examined official documents, media reports and 'grey literature' so as to more effectively grasp the framing of homelessness and associated interventions within this critical milieu.

## **Background**

A question we can now begin to consider is in what way did the 'local community' act as a driving force in the decision to introduce a payment system for the lunchtime meal service. The purpose of this approach is to dramatise the way in which the existence of the day-centre for rough sleepers became an iconographic site for prevailing assumptions

about the link between homelessness, anti-social behaviour and the perceived crisis of community cohesion. My concern is not to pass judgement on the day-centre, but simply to illustrate that there is a sequencing in the events described herein. At the same time, I am not suggesting that the idea of charging homeless people for food is in any sense 'novel' or even radical. It is, for instance, easily identifiable in the policy and programmatic nostrums of Louise Casey – the New Labour apparatchik and former 'homelessness tsar' – and various arguments about welfare producing dependency (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Dean, 1999). Rather, I wish to identify and articulate the critical exchange between the invocation of responsible citizenship and the contemporary governance of homelessness, a dimension that has been surprisingly overlooked in existing research. Having grasped this insight, I now want to show how in the course of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork, I became increasingly aware that the principle of 'personal responsibility' and the overriding strategy of 'responsibilisation' were being deployed against rough sleepers. Through drawing attention to one particular way in which homelessness is mediated by the interface between formal and informal mechanisms of social control, the following discussion provides new inroads into the politics and praxis of responsible citizenship.

### **Killing with kindness**

Moving on to discuss the phenomenon of responsibilisation in relation to my fieldwork, I want to reiterate that the impetus for the proposal came not from the day-centre but directly from a coalition of forces, principal among them Homeless Link, the district housing department and the local police. Embracing the 'Third Way' emphasis on community governance, we can begin to discern some of the ways in which the responsible citizenship discourse is employed in relation to homelessness (both service providers and service users). Two broad areas of concern here focus, first, on the ways in which the 'problem' of homelessness is reduced to a concern with a deficit model of personal responsibility and social obligation; second, on the ways in which community actors seek to incorporate the voluntary sector into their political strategies.

Over the spring and summer of 2007, the sight of literal and visible rough sleepers in the community gained particular prominence as a matter of intense public debate. As was well documented at the time (Adcock, 2007a), there was an emerging public consensus that attributed the rise of homelessness and homeless people within the locality to the existence of the day-centre. There were two key dimensions to this unfolding process. In the first place, there was a strong and credible argument that the day-centre served to attract in-migrant homeless people. In the second place, the 'problem' of homelessness became subsumed by arguments about the enforcement of laws controlling public drinking, begging and intimidating dogs. This situation gave rise to fervent and impassioned debate, which, in turn, divided along the lines of popular ire and public support. As one prominent parish and town councillor commented:

There are two camps over the day-centre – one that wants to close it down and the other that wants to put it on a proper footing. (Adcock, 2007b)

In an attempt to dispel popular misconceptions about homeless people and to foster a greater sense of community understanding as to the deleterious consequences of

homelessness, the day-centre organised a high profile public seminar with the local Conservative MP, which was attended by over 65 people (Adcock, 2007c). Running in parallel to this, a Communities and Local Government (the Government Department that sets policy for housing and homelessness), specialist adviser was dispatched to the town in the aftermath of a hot-spot survey into street homelessness which revealed significantly higher numbers of people sleeping rough than had been expected. While the Government adviser was initially tasked with reviewing the provision of services offered by the District Council to people in acute housing need, significant attention was also given to the role played by voluntary organisations and community groups, principal among them the day-centre, in responding to the needs of people experiencing homelessness. This exercise resulted, in part, in the reactivation of a long dormant homelessness forum and a fact-finding mission to Westminster City Council in order to visit the Passage (London's largest voluntary sector day-centre for homeless and vulnerable people) and the Metropolitan Police Safer Streets Homelessness Unit by representatives of the District Council housing department, the local police and the day-centre to learn about the 'Killing with Kindness' campaign ([www.killingwithkindness.com](http://www.killingwithkindness.com)). At the heart of the campaign are three interconnected concerns.

- 1 to divert people from giving to street beggars,
- 2 to reduce anti-social behaviour and substance 'misuse',
- 3 charging services users for a hot meal with a view to encouraging homeless people to assume 'responsibility' for their own welfare.

It is a revised version of this model that was taken up by the police and the District Council, and ultimately led to the introduction of the payment system at the day-centre. As one senior officer put it:

Yeah I do think that they should pay. Now in this life you get nothing for free. And I think that the people who use the [day-centre] should realise that they've got a responsibility when they use it. The vast majority of them do get, or should get or could get benefits. I think that a lot of them do get benefits there. Why should they then get their food for free? What we want is for them to become responsible for their own lives. For many reasons they have slipped on the slope of life. They have lost responsibility. If [the management] finds them a flat [then] how are they going to look after that flat if we don't make them responsible? [They need] those skills to be able to look after themselves.

### **What choice?**

Charging for food can be beneficial for some clients in order to enhance their budgeting skills and to appreciate the operation of the service they are accessing. However, in some cases – such as for clients with no resources to public funds – charging may not be appropriate (Homeless Link, 2008).

Driven by curiosity, I accepted the invitation to participate in informal consultation exercises with volunteers and service users to determine the efficacy as well as the equitability of the proposal. From the outset, I became aware of a critical body of opinion within the day-centre that openly challenged the moral and practical dimensions of this recommendation. For their part, volunteers articulated concern that this model of 'tough love' would be counterproductive, insofar as it would lead to fewer to service users

accessing the day-centre and, by degrees, exacerbate food insecurity among a population known to suffer from chronically poor nutrition (Booth, 2006).

A typical comment was:

I know the management committee seems keen to introduce charging for the lunch. It will be interesting to see whether they [service users] decide to pay, go without lunch or stop attending [the day-centre] altogether.

Faced with this situation, and driven by an ethos to serve those in need, it became increasingly evident that there was considerable unease that the initiative would marginalise notions of altruism and caring (Baines and Hardill, 2008). There are two further dimensions worth noting here. First, the core argument was viewed as a threat to the relational and intrinsic rewards conferred on volunteers. Second, the proposal to introduce a payment system for hot food was seen to be coterminous with the wider movement to reconfigure welfare provision in terms of determining need to one of changing the behaviour of recipients. One reading of this situation is the notion that the day-centre exists outside the market-oriented exchange. These two dimensions – food insecurity and the perceived threat to relational and intrinsic rewards – are pivotal to understanding the symbolic and contested nature of mobilisation of the vocabulary of responsible citizenship.

This statement, from a volunteer, reflected the feelings of many:

It will probably change how the project feels and operates. I, for one, am not persuaded. It might actually act as a deterrent and create a sense of shame and embarrassment among the users who are unable or unwilling to pay each day.

While agreeing with the sentiments expressed above, one particularly prominent volunteer remarked on the important role played by the day-centre in sustaining homeless people by providing points of contact with the wider community:

People tell me that they support the proposal, but I worry it's because they think a decision has already been made. People want us to understand their situation; to be flexible I guess. My fear is that if people are unable to pay or think that they will accumulate debt, it will mean that they might not feel comfortable coming or asking for help or advice.

This statement raises the issue of the degree to which homeless people can actively choose whether or not to patronise the day-centre. This theme was particularly strong. One reading of this is that it would give rise to an environment that is uncomfortable or at worst, exclusionary.

Reflecting on this the manager of the day-centre noted:

Our proposal to begin to charge for food has convinced me that questionnaires and interviews coming from the volunteers and service users project views that are coloured by the dynamics of power. I recently interviewed a group of half a dozen service users over a free lunch who reckoned that charging £1 for a meal was a good idea. They suggested that they could pay in advance when they received their giro.



And going further:

Two weeks later and two of that group informed me that the idea that we were going to charge for the 'crap' we served at the [day-centre] was outrageous. I was [in the process] of asking them to leave as they were too drunk to attend the centre that day. *In vino veritas* perhaps. Or maybe, as they had nothing to lose, they felt that they could say what they really thought. Same with the volunteers. They mostly agreed with the idea when asked individually, but when I introduced group discussions, with a strong character speaking first against the idea, others who had previously been in favour, including a champion, were now against [it].

Central to this response was an awareness of the exclusionary potential of the proposal. This perspective would also appear to echo Leo Howe's (1998) observation that socially excluded groups do not express explicit opposition to the prevailing social because it is perceived that the power of the latter makes this too dangerous, and thus engenders a forced acquiescence on the part of the weak.

## **Discussion**

The impression that the number of [homeless people] is increasing is correct, and not just here in [Dorset], but everywhere. Local voluntary and statutory agencies working together are making every effort to control the numbers here, with some success, but it is not easy. These are urgent needs but they can only be met if the political will is aroused. (Trustee)

From the beginning, reaction among service users was divided. One outspoken and dissenting voice argued:

It's not fair and it's not right. It might be happening elsewhere. but it can't be right that we're expected to pay for the crap that's served up. Making money out of the homeless, it's bloody outrageous. What's fucking next?

An alternative reading of the situation:

Most people agree that we should pay. It's not necessarily about being made to feel responsible but [recognising that] the food is donated and cooked by those who give of their own time. 50p for a hot lunch is the cheapest meal in [town]; you can sit down and not feel like you're being watched or judged.

The following remarks were fairly standard:

Yes it is important to make a contribution, and I'm happy to do. If you can, then you should. Absolutely . . . What if you can't? That's different, isn't it?

You're expected to pay for your dinner in Torquay. It kind of seems like most places do now, which is fair enough I suppose. The only thing is that it shouldn't be too expensive [because] then it becomes unfair and people are forced to make tough choices.

Implicit in this comment is a sense of *personal responsibility*. What it does not suggest, however, is that responsibility can be imposed or reduced to New Labour's emphasis on morality or the *active* remoralisation of homeless people. Rather, it seems to indicate that responsibility is negotiated within a perception of choices and constraints. Given the social and psychological pressures facing homeless people, there is a need to recognise that homeless people encode citizenship with cultural meanings, which reflect both common and discrete experiences of social exclusion. It is this experience of existing on the outer edges of society, which enables us to grasp how the experience of social exclusion has strong material as well as relational circumstances and consequences.

Anyone can become homeless. It might be because of a divorce; perhaps you lose your job or have a breakdown and end up on the streets. It's like that MP [Caroline Flint] only been in the job a few minutes and saying that people should be kicked out and made homeless if they don't 'behave'. What kind of answer's that when people need real help? (Comment made by intermittent service user).

In this statement, responsible citizenship is viewed as a moral assessment. This is especially important because it contests some of the core ideological assumptions of the responsibility discourse and, equally, critiques prevailing assumptions about homelessness and homeless people.

As one service user noted:

Sending people to prison isn't the answer. It's all wrong [because] it costs hundreds to put someone inside each day and thousands each year. And for what? You come out and before you know it you're back inside again. . . We [homeless people] need homes not prison. What's the government doing for people like us?

Arguing from the evidence adduced here, it is clear that the service users challenged the pernicious view that homelessness can simply be reduced to a deficit model of citizenship. At one extreme, some service users straightforwardly and unquestioning accepted the logic of the proposal. Here housing status was vital, as it was generally people who had been resettled and working towards addressing drug or alcohol use, mental health problems, housing status, physical health and training and education needs. This would seem to suggest that while homeless and other vulnerable people are on the economic outcrop of society, it is not the case that they exist on the periphery of morality. Charting a middle course, some service users simply acquiesced with the policy to charge for food. We can perhaps attribute this to feelings of embarrassment, reticence or stigma (Howe, 1985: 68). At the other extreme, service users resisted the idea on the basis that it discriminated against a community afflicted by penury and material want. This is not to imply that homeless people do not want to become part of the 'respectable' or mainstream society as evoked by the notion of responsible citizenship. Rather, it is to argue those who accessed the day-centre regarded the emphasis on social citizenship as seen in the work of T.H. Marshall (1950) as now being overshadowed by the centrality of rights and obligations in contemporary discursive accounts and institutional practices (Kivisto and Faist, 2007).

## Conclusions

This discussion set out to raise fundamental questions about the link between homelessness, citizenship and the responsabilisation thesis. As a consequence of this, I have attempted to show that the idea that asking homeless people to pay for food engenders a sense of personal responsibility is not easily proved and, for that matter, neither does it address homelessness per se. The broader point is that speaking of responsible citizenship helps us to focus our attention on the explicit moral justifications that are employed against rough sleepers and other socially excluded groups. It also emphasises the degree to which 'the political narrative of community and individual responsibility is one that deliberately deflects attention from the causes of poverty' (Imrie and Raco, 2003: 30).

Apart from the labelling and stereotyping, which the notion of responsible citizenship evokes, much of the dominant discourse about homelessness and citizenship is obscurantist. It is obscurantist precisely because it negates to recognise that the real cause of homelessness is not a lack of personal responsibility but a lack of affordable housing and good-quality ancillary support services. This means two things. On one level, this ethnographic example has demonstrated that responsible citizenship, rather than being a panacea for intractable social, economic and political problems, overlooks the fundamental point that homelessness is, for many people, about the pervasive effects of low status in a profoundly unequal society. On another level, this discussion would appear to support the notion that 'who counts' as a responsible citizen should remain an object of debate within the social sciences. A necessary part of this process is the challenge of resetting the metronome of responsibility so that it better reflects the needs and aspirations of people with experience of homelessness and 'deep' social exclusion.

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