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2030

Essays on possible futures

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The Y-Foundation is one of the key national developers of the Housing First principle in Finland. The Y-Foundation offers affordable rental housing and encourages public discussion on themes related to homelessness. The Y-Foundation is the fourth largest landlord in the country. It tries to support their residents' social and financial well-being. The Foundation also provides new solutions and knowledge on housing, like employment activities. The Y-Foundation was founded in 1985.

# Homelessness in 2030

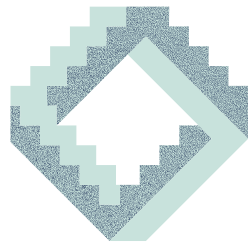
Essays on possible futures



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# No one is Homeless. What is Missing?



The year is 2030. The setting is one of the European so-called “smart cities”. Homelessness has been eradicated here. The metropolitan homelessness initiative, launched in 2019, has been completely successful.

Julien Damon

Fuelled with a mix of Housing First programmes, comprehensive health-related services and anti-social behaviour orders, the initiative has succeeded in meeting its public goals. As some countries in the developing world have declared themselves slum-free countries, the municipality is proud to be labelled by the European Commission a “homeless-free” city.

For the most part, local homeless have been provided with stable housing and support. Some have been evicted from the city and sent back to their country of origin, usually far from the external border of the European Union.

Whatever we think about the policies and their ideological backgrounds, they achieved this: neither inhabitants nor tourists may witness any homeless people on the streets. But, regarding atmosphere in the different neighbourhoods, it sounds bizarre sometimes. What is being missed? What is really lacking?

Indeed, some people do miss rough sleepers and beggars, whether they acknowledge it or not. Having ended homelessness does not upset anyone. But it has had unexpected side effects. Let's investigate.

In 1972, the American sociologist Herbert Gans published, in the highly praised *American Journal of Sociology*, an article entitled “The Positive Functions of Poverty”. Still considered an influential classic, it is still worth reading in 2030. Gans details the benefits the more affluent classes derived from the existence of poverty and the poor. He states that the conventional view of poverty, in affluent societies, “is so dedicated to identifying the dysfunctions of poverty, both for the poor and the nation, that at first glance it seems inconceivable to suggest that poverty could be functional for anyone.” Gans goes on to explain fifteen positive functions of poverty.

Let's turn to the contemporary context of eradicated homelessness. Let's say, more precisely, that

in 2030 rough-sleeping has been eliminated from our European smart-city. This quick foresight exercise will help us point how homelessness can actually be beneficial to society. As strange and repulsive as it may sound.

We won't treat fifteen subjects in-depth. Assuming we are in 2030, we will only distinct three areas of functions homeless, rough-sleepers and beggars used to have: economic, social, political.

## Disappeared economic functions

A first economic function of homelessness and the homeless was to ensure part of society's “dirty work” was done. For the majority of the connected and clean streets of the 2030 metropolis, most of the physically dirty and dangerous human jobs have been replaced by robots, digital devices and sensors. Waste scavenging has been integrated into the city waste management policy. Now, there seems no need to have destitute people to complete jobs which the general public still perceive to be beneath them, such as cleaning the streets of thrown-away empty cans.

A second economic function of homelessness and poverty was to subsidise a variety of economic activities, with low wages. It was also to support innovation in medical practice with homeless people acting as guinea pigs in experiments. More

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generally, they sell their blood in order to make a little money. By 2030, we no longer see homeless waiting in line to have a needle put in their arms for up to two hours. It is said that, in the city, we'll never run out plasma because we are now able to produce it from synthetic biology. Homeless blood is not needed anymore. Homeless persons are no longer being paid for that.

The existence of homeless – it is a third economic function – used to provide work for institutions and people, in charities and public bodies. For decades, homelessness has created jobs for a number of occupations and professions that serve the homeless or protect society from them. Since the ending of rough sleeping, a huge management effort has been required. While homeless people were moved into transitional and permanent housing, the entire shelter industry had to be radically transformed. And lots of people had to be trained in order to change jobs. Current unemployment is partly due to these still ongoing difficult conversions. Today, there is not one former social worker who laments the disappearance of the plight of homeless people. But some of them regret the good old days of their professional careers. Across Europe, the fight against homelessness has been a driver for social innovation. Now that the battle is won, innovation has left the social arena.

A last economic function originated from homeless consumption. They consumed goods other did not want. In that way, they prolonged usefulness of day old bread or second-hand clothes. They often offered a new lease of life for coats, tents, sleeping bags. Nowadays, none of this stuff appears to be as convenient as it used to be.

### Lost social functionalities

In the social field – in 2030 we are asked not to use the word *societal*-, it has been highlighted that a surprising benefit for society was the contribution to homelessness, in itself, to the social order.

Homeless, vagrants, tramps, hobos, travellers, could be identified and punished as alleged or real dangerous deviants. As a potential threat to the foundations of a society and to the well-being in a city, the existence of homeless had an important purpose: to uphold the legitimacy of conventional norms. Without them any longer in the city, many misbehaviours and counter-examples may be now lacking. As a social function, homelessness was very practical when you needed to criticise some behaviours or life choices such as doing drugs, cutting off with relatives, binge-drinking. Even if these matters and deviant activities remain, they are not as easily denounced and stigmatised as when they were associated with suspicious persons and marginalised people.

More broadly, homelessness had some power in terms of social stratification and status quo. It helped to guarantee the status of those who were not as poor as the homeless. Having homeless on the streets could authorise a permanent comparison between the different classes of people. In 2030, without this moral compass it is harder to know precisely where you stand and easier to believe that you belong to a vast middle-class society.

In terms of culture, homeless people, and parts of the city they used to live in (slums, shantytowns, skid rows), have operated, since a very long time, as sources of inspiration. The 2030 clean and smart metropolis might not be as inspiring as the poet,

the movie maker or the song writer would need it to be. A sterilised and sanitised city proves not very attractive for all kind of artists. To a certain extent, cultural originality relies on social marginality. Without any visible homeless and without freak and exotic neighbourhoods, urban life fades over time. Mainstream way of living needs some marginality components to compare with.

In a more spiritual sense, the disappearance of homeless and beggars appears to be a big issue. Years ago, the city's inhabitants had the opportunity to give some spare change when they felt sorry for destitute children or elderly. In 2030, it is no longer possible to take pity on them, because they all vanished from public space. Without homeless and without the opportunity to give money and assistance to the homeless it may become harder to do a good turn once a day or once a week. Functionally, homelessness was very advantageous for charity affairs. It allowed people to buy redemption and to try to achieve their salvation.

### Extinct political controversies

Homeless were both economically and socially useful. They were politically helpful as well. On the one hand, they did participate less than other groups. Hence, they weren't themselves a target for electoral campaigning. On the other hand, they were targeted as a main social problem. Homelessness had thus been, for decades, a very challenging issue, at the heart of important political controversies. Without them, no more discussion about deep poverty and inequality. Those important debates, though, remain critical, whether some people sleep rough or not.

In fact, the end of homelessness raises new disputes about the underclass. *Underclass* is considered, in 2030, to be the prevailing synonym of *lumpenproletariat* (in Marx's words), the lowest stratum of the proletariat. Among other groups criminals, vagabonds and vagrants, prostitutes

were usually included in this category. The term has been extensively used from say 1848 to 2030 with very negative connotations. Marxist theorists described the underclass devoid of class consciousness, exploited by reactionary and counter-revolutionary forces. They contrasted it with the praised proletariat.

In their view, the lumpenproletariat is not even part of the "reserve army of labour" but it could be enlisted to combat the true proletariat in its efforts to bring about the end of bourgeois society. In a 2030 smart city there is no more lumpenproletariat, nor is there anything like proletariat.

To put it in a nutshell, having terminated homelessness does not mean reaching the end of history (as Marx predicted it). But it is certainly having removed the concerns about inequality from the public agenda.

At last, the question "what is missing?", raised in the title of this paper, opens up new prospects trying to answer another question: "was Marx so wrong?". The 19th century philosopher continues to be functional to tackle some concerns of the 21st century, such as the persistence of homelessness.

### Conclusion

This functional and fictional analysis might sound overly cynical; however, there is truth in it. Although this significant part of reality is hard to swallow. Envisioning a city without homeless is a way to stress how thought-provoking the issue is.

The ultimate truth is that homelessness, in 2030, is certainly not being missed by former homeless themselves. Obviously, the benefits of not having homeless on the streets outweigh any drawback of losing homelessness.