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Briloff Entry: Soup Kitchens Are Unethical

Today, there are over 60,000 homeless people in NYC. This is an all time high. At the same, there are hundreds of soup kitchens, shelters and organizations working to 'end homelessness' and provide food security. Even though there are homeless on the street daily, the amount of donation money given nationwide every for alleviating homelessness (as well as volunteer services) is in the billions.

This paper argues that soup kitchens are an unethical way of alleviating the pressures of homelessness because they enforce a hierarchy upon those that are homeless; it is only those that are homed that have the access to cook, utilize and serve food in the soup kitchens. Rather than imply that others have to service the homeless, a more ethical impact on the community would be to open up soup kitchens and allow the homeless to cook for themselves and each other. Furthermore, if society legitimizes homelessness, allows it to occur and simply guarantees several safe spaces where the homeless can organize themselves, cook for themselves, and obtain resources for themselves- they might live a much more decent life than they now have living under an oppressive force that strongly wants them out of sight and out of mind. Instead of imposing a hierarchical structure on the homeless (and isolate them further) we as a society, should use our empathy to empower them and embrace their nomadic existence as another way to embody life.

To understand the homeless, it is imperative to understand that many who are homeless are not simply searching for homes- they are searching for communities and people that fit their needs. As many anthropologists have observed, homeless communities exist and function with coherent cultural habits and rules- their homelessness is not an act of deviancy or illness. For instance LGBT teens living in less tolerant home living situations, use homelessness to find likeminded people who can provide support for each other through their transitions into adulthood. Another source of proof is a social experiment done by a man in 2011, who while participating in the Occupy Wall Street movement decided to become homeless and blog about it. His blog "Homeless in NYC" is a remarkable account and insight into NYC's homeless shelters. He documents and observes the intricate exchanges, societies and internal organizational functions within the homeless themselves. Despite not having much money, an entire economic exchange in the shelters is able to function and provide resources for the community- similarly to prison economies. His most astounding observation is that most of the homeless *do not want homes*. Many like their society and want to continue living it. This isn't to say there aren't homeless individuals that are looking for homes- but in many cases, that is just a specific demographic of the homeless population that is ready and able to bounce back to being homed whenever it is available to them. Could it actually be that the dysfunction we witness of the homeless is not because of their lack of shelter, but because of the harsh treatment by the homed society and the homed government?

It is essential to understand that the homeless are not 'problem' that needs to be solved. Not only is that dehumanizing and subjects living people to a just a single blanket condition, it disguises the premise under which the classification came about. The idea of being homeless as a 'problem' that needs to be solved arose in the politics of the 1980s, when NYC's richest came back to the city and wanted to stop seeing NYC's poorest. The city began carting them to the outskirts, brutalizing them, and trying to place them into rehabilitation and subsidized housing units in which they usually don't do well in. Many simply deemed it an issue caused by the decrease in psych wards in the city, and called the homeless population a mentally ill population. However, studies done on homeless societies mostly discount the 'facts' that homeless people are either ill or irreversibly poor. In actuality, homeless people are much more characterized by a psychological profile; a lack of responsiveness to the traditional 'time space path'. In 2000 paper published in Medical Anthropology Quarterly, anthropologists Jennifer Welch and Stacey Rowe describe this profile as ascribing a life path not to a routine, in the way that the homed do, but to a locale. Their daily life paths revolve much less around fixed stations and activities, but places in which their needs can be met. Furthermore, the same paper describes how the homeless in California were notably better organized and resources wealthy when they were allowed to use beach showers and barbecue pits at Santa Monica beach. In a house called Harbor House, which was open for the homeless to operate and use, they were able to spread essential resources around their groups and make sure that towels and communal items were not stolen and best utilized. Insights like these really radically change what it really means to be homeless. Ultimately, who are we to dictate that one perspective of living is better over another? A single home better than a multitude of streets? An identity better than a nameless, floating existence?

However, today the homeless are not allowed to sleep in parks or subways which were previously open to them. Only 'public land' such as sidewalks and curbs, are legal and even then, some businesses are allowed to remove the homeless from the premises. Cops are allowed to remove homeless from wherever they are if they are deemed to be a 'public nuisance'. This is unethical response to a minority group. Casting people off the streets, particularly by our own government, does not serve the people that occupy its soil. Even the origins of homeless shelters -a response to complaints by the ultra wealthy- proves that these 'services' were never meant to truly serve the homeless, but push them out of their living spaces. But the question here is why should it be a crime to wish to live a different type of human experience? Why is it a crime to live rent free and identity free?

Homelessness was not always a crime. It was first criminalized by the Roman Empire, when they made it illegal to be a 'vagrant' so that proper taxes could be collected from the citizens and fear could be used to control them. However in other countries, like India, homelessness has been embraced for centuries. Unlike in the United States, the homeless are not shunned. They function within society and interact with the homed. In many cases, they provide numerous services like musical troupes and shamans. In other cases, they become scavengers of trash piles, salvaging and scrapping the things that can be reused to greatly reduce waste.. All around

the world, homeless culture is similar- colorful nomads and buskers forming supportive communities that suit their needs.

Even today, the demographics inside the homeless populations are very diverse. There are employed homeless. There are migrant worker homeless. There are veteran homeless. And there are student homeless. All these people are similar in that they do not wish to struggle for a place to sleep and have a desire to free themselves from a homestead. It is my belief that having such a desire does not give others the authority to force an identity and a location to your name. It does make you an exception to dignity and respect. And it should not make you a target for 'authority' to oppress and overpower. It makes you human - as equally so as anyone else.

For me, the organization of soup kitchens are the most unethical practice for homeless people. Despite the fact that the ingredients are donated as charity, these kitchen are only ran and managed by homed people. Only homed people have access to the kitchens and only homed people have access to kitchen ingredients. And, only homed people can serve the homeless- instead of the homeless serving each other. That these people are often volunteers adds to that inequality because they feed off of the psychological reward of 'helping those with less'; to feed that reward, there must be those with less. Thus in a macro sense, these people are not 'helping' and providing solidarity; there are imposing their strength and their time resources on others by prove their worth. As food anthropologists, and even those hosting a dinner meal, serving people food is never about just the food itself- it is ultimately about the relationships you have with them.

So why not open the soup kitchen for the homeless to operate and use? Why not make public communal kitchens (and for that matter donation based public showers and bathrooms) available?¹. Why not end the hierarchy, so that the homeless have the ability to organize, feed and provide for each other and solve their issues - instead of constantly feel downtrodden, looked down upon- and used as an excuse by some teenager trying to do community service so they can later claim insight to the 'struggle' of others on their college applications?

Rather than have the homed constantly think of fruitless ways to keep them off the streets and 'feed those that can't feed themselves'; the homeless *can* feed themselves- they just need a system that allows their psychological needs to be understood and their societies to be given a space to thrive. By propelling a system in which they are not allowed access to kitchens and showers and reasonable places to sleep, we are promoting our power to oppress and not our ability to understand, empower and accept those that choose a lifestyle that fits their needs.

I strongly believe that soup kitchens are unethical and the most ethical organization of helping the homeless get the proper nutrition they need is to open their access to the kitchens and give

¹ One of the biggest issues for the homeless is actually diabetes because they rely on processed foods and dollar meals because they don't have kitchen where they can properly process fruits and vegetables

it to them. They need the ability to create nutritious meals for themselves and each other allows them to empower themselves through the healing power of sharing food.