

Zsolt Temesváry, Sabrina Roduit, Matthias Drilling: Conceptualising destitution: Theoretical understanding and practical relevance¹

Absztrakt

Jelen tanulmány a nincstelenség (destitution)² újszerű és kifejező társadalomelméleti fogalmát vizsgálja. A nincstelenség tágabb koncepciója alkalmas az esszenciális szegénység és a szélsőséges társadalmi kirekesztés ábrázolására. A nincstelenség újszerű társadalomtudományi megközelítése kihívást jelent a korábbi neoliberális, jövedelem-alapú szegénység vizsgálatokkal szemben, mivel a szegénységet a lakáspiac, a foglalkoztatás, a családi kapcsolatok és az egészség terén megjelenő deprivációk többrétegű kapcsolatrendszerén keresztül mutatja be és nem csupán a materiális tényezőkre összpontosít. Noha a nincstelenség az egyén szintjén megjelenő biológiai és pszichológiai deprivációk mentén is tanulmányozható, írásunk elsősorban a fogalom strukturális, szociálpolitikai dimenziójával foglalkozik és mindenekelőtt két területre összpontosít: a hajléktalan személyek és a papírok nélküli migránsok szociális jogaira és jogosultságaira. A nincstelenség fogalma számos szociológiai, filozófiai, közgazdaságtani és politikai tényezőt foglal magában. Jelen írásunkban a szociális munka és a szociálpolitika elmélete és gyakorlata mentén vizsgáljuk a jelenséget.

Kulcsszavak: nincstelenség, abszolút szegénység, egzisztenciális szegénység, társadalmi kirekesztés, hajléktalanság

Abstract

This paper analyses destitution as a new and expressive notion in describing the multifaceted nature of essential poverty and severe social exclusion. The novel concept of destitution emerged in the social sciences to challenge the dominant neoliberal, income-based approach of poverty studies and to scrutinise poverty and social deprivation in a multi-layered dimension considering the lack of resources in the areas of the housing market, employment and family relationships, as well as in mental and physical health. Although destitution can also be described as the lack of individual biological and psychological resources, our paper primarily examines the socio-political, structural reasons lying behind the notion, focusing on two areas: social rights and entitlements for homeless people and undocumented migrants. Although the term ‘destitution’ incorporates multiple sociological, philosophical, economic and political dimensions, the current paper primarily applies the theoretical and practical approach of social work and social policy in conceptualising the notion.

Key words: destitution, absolute poverty, existential poverty, social exclusion, homelessness

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² The notion of destitution does not have a generally accepted and applied translation in the Hungarian scientific literature, therefore we have opted to use the word “nincstelenség” to describe it.

Introduction: The theoretical development of destitution

The notion of destitution was first applied in the poverty studies conducted in Victorian England at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries to describe the immense misery of urban poor households. As the thriving Western welfare states successfully eliminated absolute poverty for decades in the second half of the 20th century, the relative approach to poverty became dominant in both social sciences and state-run welfare policies. Nevertheless, the new social problems characterising modern risk societies (BECK, 1992) require a novel understanding of poverty which considers poverty not only in terms of financial and material deprivation, but recognises its multifaceted features as well.

From absolute poverty to destitution

People live in absolute poverty when they are deprived of even the most essential goods and other resources needed to live as a human being in society. Thus, the notion of absolute poverty refers to a certain state of living in which the satisfaction of biological needs for food and shelter is seriously hindered by one's unfavourable living conditions. These threatening social circumstances can be widespread over a whole geographical area (horizontal approach) or can be sporadic, affecting only certain individuals and groups whose social status steadily falls behind the others' in a given community (vertical approach). According to Dominelli (2019: 17), absolute poverty has two dimensions that influence the social status of affected people. These dimensions are the *domestic relational space* and the *public relational space*. Domestic relational space refers to "*the individual managing to meet daily needs and routines*" while public relational space shows the governmental responses and policies aimed at managing poverty. Dominelli states that poverty must be contemplated and handled in a geographical context. This means that both individual actions and strategies (coping strategies), and state-induced reactions (measures and legislation) should basically be observed in the framework of the nation-state (particularly in the absence of a unified European social policy), applying within its geographic and administrative borders.

Although early Malthusian approaches mostly considered poverty as a personal failure that originated from the inappropriate behaviour and poor morals of individuals (see DALY, 1971), later studies revealed the inevitable importance and effect of broader social structures (LEPENIES, 2015). In particular, the early urban studies of Booth and Rowntree, carried out among destitute industrial workers in the cities of York and London, discovered that the low wages paid to the workers were the primary reason for financial poverty, and that proper political measures might reduce financial needs. However, even in Booth's work the moral description of poverty, namely that poverty degrades human morals, had a relatively large impact (see SPICKER, 1990: 21).

Nevertheless, Booth considered poverty a threatening factor in the eradication of human morals, and did not refer to moral deficiencies as explanatory reasons lying behind poverty. Booth differentiated extreme poverty from other forms of poverty and characterised it as "*very poor*" people "*living in chronic want*" (BOOTH, 1902: 33), whose life is "*unending struggle and lack of comfort*" (BOOTH, 1902: 131). Booth realised that even poverty is stratified and thus detached destitute people from the *regular poor* in his analysis: "*I made an estimate of the total proportion of the people visibly living in poverty, and from amongst these separated the cases in which the poverty appeared to be extreme and amounted to destitution.*" (BOOTH, 1901, see ROWNTREE, 1922: 356; KEATING, 1976: 197). This early stratification of poverty had a large impact on later poverty studies, particularly in the analysis of absolute poverty and its connected notions such as destitution, extreme poverty, ultra-poverty and existential poverty.

In the area of social work, Jane Addams' (1912) settlement movement of social care opened new dimensions in understanding the multi-layered nature of poverty, considering the housing, medical and employment-related factors behind the notion.

Since the second half of the 20th century the dominant neoconservative and neoliberal approaches to social policy explained poverty as the direct consequence of financial shortages, and this argumentation lasted for decades. In modern social sciences the term destitution was applied almost exclusively by poverty studies carried out in low-income countries with developing economies like Bangladesh and India (see BANERJEE and DUFLO, 2011; YUNUS, 2017). The modern neoliberal approach to income-based poverty and material deprivation was often reflected in the global development programmes and strategies of large international organisations. In its report on global poverty, the World Bank considers people to be living in extreme poverty if they live on less than 1.9 USD a day, and in moderate poverty if their daily income is less than 3.1 USD. According to the World Bank's report on global poverty (2013: 16) there are still more than 1 billion people worldwide living in destitution and despite the improvement in eradicating global poverty, there are regions where this is not achievable through international development policies and actions (e.g., the sub-Saharan region).

Furthermore, the Eurostat conceptualised poverty as the manifestation of financial needs for a long period of time and considered people to be relatively poor if their income sank under 60 percent of the national median income per-capita, and extremely poor if this proportion was under 40 percent (see EU-SILC). This materialistic-economic statistical approach to poverty fits perfectly with the evidence-based social policies of the neoliberal and neoconservative market-economies which focus on providing social assistance to needy households based on their means-tested income rather than developing comprehensive and preventive anti-poverty programmes (SPOLANDER et al., 2014; STRIER, 2019). However, it is worthwhile to mention that national social policies always rather applied their own indicators (like the subsistence minimum in Switzerland) to assess eligibilities on social supports than using the poverty lines of international organisations like the OECD, the World Bank or the Eurostat.

Townsend (1993) was one of the first modern social scientists to state that poverty was much more than material deprivation, and that in addition to the economic aspects, multiple psychological, social and biological factors could also lay behind it. Thus, Townsend developed a basic list of material (e.g., income and housing) and nonmaterial (e.g., leisure activities, good education and quality healthcare) items whose absence could lead to poverty. This new approach on fundamental *welfare packages* raised attention to the multi-layered understanding of poverty. Amartya Sen (2000) developed this novel multifaceted and relational approach to poverty even further and confirmed that poverty is much more than the absence of economic resources. In doing so, instead of focusing solely on material deprivation, Sen scrutinised the capabilities necessary to social inclusion and participation. Sen's capability approach applies Bourdieu's theory of human capital (particularly its social-relational nature) and takes into account what people can or cannot do with the available resources they have. According to the capability approach, the absence of possibilities or rights to exchange proper social, psychological and biological resources hinders individuals from living the life they want (and deserve), and from unfolding their real and often hidden skills and abilities (DRILLING, 2008).

In extreme cases the severe lack of social and other resources can lead to the state of *social suffering* (BOURDIEU, 1993) in which people cannot break out of the circle of deprivation and permanently suffer from precarious living, working and housing conditions. In the state of *social suffering* people are not only excluded from social and other services, but they are "*expulsed from moral and political society*" (HARRIS-WHITE, 2005: 884). This means that

although destitute people are part of society due to their physical existence, they no longer belong to society in moral, legal and political terms.

Although absolute poverty seemed to have disappeared from the economically developed European countries during the golden age of the welfare state (MCNICOLL and ESPING-ANDERSEN, 1997), and the international understanding of poverty had been redirected to relative poverty, a spectacular re-institutionalisation of absolute poverty has taken place in Europe since the early 2010s (GAISBAUER et al., 2019). Dominelli calls this new form of absolute poverty *existential poverty*, referring to the daily struggles of people to acquire food and shelter. The term *existential poverty* differentiates the novel forms of absolute poverty experienced in wealthy Western countries from the universal and horizontal poverty of the Global South (real absolute poverty). Although the notion *existential poverty* is still based on material approaches, its meaning is quite close to *destitution*, since it clearly expresses the vertical-structural character of poverty focusing on the poorest among the poor. Undocumented migration and homelessness, and particularly their precarious combination (homeless undocumented migrants), are two main causes of existential poverty and destitution in the postmodern Western welfare states (ALLEN et al., 2020; ISAAC, 2016; FREEMAN and MIRILOVIC, 2016).

Conceptualising destitution

As the direct consequence of increasing economic deprivation and social exclusion in European welfare states, the term destitution has re-appeared in contemporary social sciences (DOMINELLI, 2019; BRADSHAW and MOVSHUK, 2019) in the last couple of years. In its original (Latin) sense destitution means to abandon or desert someone (JRS, 2010). Harris-White (2005: 881) describes destitution as a severe form of poverty that is “*institutionalised within state practice and law*”. Dasgupta (1993) describes destitution as a “*fatal and sharp form of deprivation*” that affects people’s working and housing conditions as well as their health and social networks. The Oxford English Dictionary gives *destitution* as a synonym of *poverty* and *indigence* (WALKER, 2019: 100), however the notion has a much more meaningful and deeper expression in postmodern social sciences.

In the field of critical social sciences, destitution refers to a “*material and discursive configuration that is constituted of extreme impoverishment and dependency on others for the means of survival*” (CODDINGTON et al., 2020: 3). Furthermore, based on the political concept of the European Commission a destitute person “*is left without assistance in a precarious situation*” or “*left alone by society*” (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2014: 7). Destitution is thus a scientific as well as a political and a heuristic concept that aims to sensitise for the interwovenness of material deprivation, social exclusion and the loss of control over one’s life (JRS, 2007). Destitute people are largely dependent on the goodwill of others in a relationship that can be described as “*rather permanent*” (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2014: 8). Crawley et al. (2011: 21) refer to the destitute as people “*whose access to resources is prohibited through legislation and policy*”. According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) destitution is “*usually viewed as the extreme end of a spectrum of material hardship*”. Lipton (1988) referred to destitution as *ultra-poverty*, which phrase was later further developed by Alkire et al. (2014: 1) as *multi-dimensional ultra-poverty*, highlighting the multiple housing, employment, education, health and nutrition-related factors behind destitution.

All the approaches illustrating the state of destitution conclude that destitute people are the poorest among the poor (SEN, 1976), the lowest layer of the society, and they form a so-called *underclass* within society (see AVENEL, 1997). They suffer not only from serious social

exclusion and material deprivation, but also have particular so-called “cultural” characteristics that differentiate them from other social groups. These distinguishing cultural features can be seen for instance in the language, food consumption, dress or the forms of housing of vulnerable social groups. Oscar Lewis (1966: 19) described these particular marks as the “*culture of poverty*” referring to the special living and consumption patterns of poor people.

In the area of modern statistics, due to its horizontal and structural nature, destitution cannot be expressed solely through traditional income-based poverty rates. Other indicators from housing, employment and health are also important to express people’s objective or subjective wellbeing. Apart from the national offices of statistics, international organisations and agencies have also recognised the impact of thus far neglected human and environmental factors in the context of wellbeing. The UN’s 2019 *Multidimensional Poverty Index* (MPI) takes into account not only the financial situation of individuals, but their access to appropriate healthcare and education, too (UNDP, 2020). Through the analysis of 101 developing countries, in which 76 percent of the world’s population live (5.7 billion people), the MPI shows that almost a quarter (23.1 percent) of people live in multidimensional poverty and suffer from severe deprivation.

The EU’s statistical office has also recognised that a multi-level examination of poverty and social exclusion now takes priority over the former income-based estimations. In pursuit of this, Eurostat’s *At Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion* (AROPE) indicators (2020) measure the complex dimension of poverty and include indicators that cover not only financial poverty, but also severe material deprivation and in-work poverty. These new statistical responses to poverty, social exclusion and deprivation are already much closer to the core concept of destitution, although even these newly developed indicators focus on analysing personal living conditions rather than structural dimensions.

The multidimensional approach to destitution is particularly important – compared to the earlier perspectives on extreme poverty – in assessing the role of low work intensity (see AROPE indicators on in-work poverty) in impoverishment. This labour-based approach has a huge relevance in modern risk societies where labour markets cannot provide guarantees against financial poverty and destitution anymore. In contemporary risk societies not only low-paid jobs, but also precarious working conditions can lead to severe in-work poverty (MCCANN and MCKITTRICK, 2012: 8; GANGOPADHYAY et al., 2014: 242). The participation of destitute people in Western labour markets often takes the form of an impossible separation between personal life and labour activities, whereby their efforts are purely limited to the satisfaction of individual biological needs like food and shelter for simple survival. These activities are – for instance – begging, street music, street prostitution and the collection of garbage. Hannah Arendt (1998) applied three categories of “human activities” to illustrate the so-called active life (*vita activa*) of people, and differentiated this kind of “labour” from the higher-level categories of “work” and “activities”. In her typology “work” is time limited and separated from people’s private life, and “activities” are the area of personally preferred actions that people choose to do in their spare time. This system of labour, work and activity depicts the stratification of a society and the distance between labour and activities demonstrates people’s increased social position and life possibilities.

According to Dominelli’s approach to *public relational spaces* and Harris-White’s concept of the responsibility of state actors and legislation, destitution is the direct consequence of the institutional or structural exclusion of vulnerable groups. This means that besides the individual, primary biological and psychological factors of destitution, welfare structures have a growing importance not only in the alleviation of destitution, but even in its evolution and exacerbation. Consequently, besides the previously dominant psychological and sociological approaches, the science of social work and social policy also have growing importance in the examination of

destitution as these principles are able to provide system-oriented perspectives to reveal the structural characteristics of the problem. In particular, macro social work can deliver first-hand information about and knowledge of threatening factors (e.g., in the area of housing and employment) regarding various social systems (BRUEGGEMAN, 2014). This systemic approach of social work to destitution is particularly important as community-based resources are essential to improving individual wellbeing (DELGADO, 1999), and the exclusion from public (welfare) services can significantly hinder the successful social integration of vulnerable groups (SEN, 1999). Direct institutional discrimination emerges when the entire socio-political system (institutions of education, healthcare and social policy) is involved in the structural exclusion of vulnerable social groups on a legal basis (see MCCRUDDEN, 1982; HODGE et al., 1993).

In her systemic approach, Harris-White refers to destitute people as *non-people* from the institution-based perspective of the state. Based on this concept, it is not only the basic needs of destitute people that are neglected by state actors, but their very existence is ignored within the system. Accordingly, destitution can be illustrated through a threefold model in which (1) people are unable to acquire any assets, (2) they are excluded from insurance mechanisms (particularly from the system of social security) and finally (3) they are unable to access the primary labour market (HARRIS-WHITE, 2005: 881). These dimensions can be supplemented by a fourth factor, namely that the state turns a blind eye to the plight of destitute people (who are often labelled as social tourists or migrant workers) instead of addressing the real nature of their problems. One can see such system-induced destitution, for instance, in the plight of Central and Eastern European Roma, whose access to the systems of housing, labour, education and health is significantly worse compared to other social groups (BERNÁT, 2016). The severe ethnic-based and spatial marginalisation of Roma communities in the Central and Eastern European countries (see VIRÁG, 2010; RUSNÁKOVÁ et al., 2015) is still an unresolved problem for the European Union.

Based on the report of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS, 2010: 9), destitution can be traced back to at least three fundamental factors: (1) the lack of basic resources like shelter, warm food or fresh water, (2) the measures of state policy that systematically exclude vulnerable groups (e.g., migrants and homeless people) from the usage of state-run welfare services, and finally (3) the lack of opportunity to break out of the vicious cycle of deprivations. This JRS model is fairly similar to Harris-White's dimensions and identifies the origin of destitution in material needs, social exclusion and systemic deprivation alike. The lack of basic resources corresponds to the traditional approach of absolute poverty (GAISBAUER, 2019; LEPENIES, 2015) and shows the missing resources whose lack endangers the biological existence of individuals. The role and responsibility of state-run social policy in the exacerbation of destitution is reflected through Dominelli's approach to *public relational spaces*, and refers to the socio-political measures that handle destitution politically, showing the willingness of decision makers to solve the problem. Finally, the third concept covering peoples' inability to break out of deprivation is close to Sen's *capability approach*, and supposes that destitute people are deprived of the financial, relational and cultural resources which are necessary to live in the way they want and unfold their skills and abilities.

Destitution in the life course: a dynamic perspective on destitution

From a life-course perspective, destitution corresponds to the concept of cumulative disadvantages in the life trajectory (DANNEFER, 2009). People in a destitute situation encounter simultaneous difficulties in multidimensional ways and accumulate multiple factors

of vulnerability during their life course in the areas of housing, employment, family life and health (BILGER et al., 2011; TEMESVÁRY, 2019; RODUIT, 2020). Vulnerabilities in the life course can be observed from several aspects, including sociological, psychological, economic and also geographical perspectives. Taking these perspectives into consideration leads to a broader overview of the reality of vulnerabilities and their role in personal life trajectories.

Vulnerabilities can be traced back to social (and mental) insecurity and uncertainty that endanger the individual's social security and mental stability and disrupt social cohesion at the community level. These endangering political, economic, social and mental effects on individual and social wellbeing accompany people during their life course and significantly influence their behaviours, actions, social relationships, and emotional balance. The perception of these negative effects and the intensity of threatening factors can deviate between different people and social groups; therefore, the personal (subjective) perception of problems is always more important from the viewpoint of individual crisis development than the objective perception (THOMPSON, 2011). The loss of a job or housing would probably mean an extraordinary challenge for anyone, however most people are able to handle the hardships and find a new employment or apartment using their available social and mental resources (coping strategies). However, deprived groups (e.g., homeless people, undocumented migrants, and people with disabilities) with deficient social resources are unable to apply effective problem-solving techniques and methods. Naturally not only their current social status, but also biological determinants like age, physique and gender can influence the potential reactions to any problems that arise. Threatening vulnerability factors can be particularly intense in the transition between various age-specific institutional structures (for example on entering the labour market after finishing school).

Crises and other stressors in the life course and the lack of biological or relational resources to handle crisis situations lead to vulnerability (SPINI et al., 2013: 24). Thompson (2011) differentiated three possible stages of the crisis process. The first phase is the so-called *steady state* which characterises people's mental and social conditions before the crisis situation. The second stage is the *hazardous event* that endangers the former steady state, when people are unable to handle or resolve the situation with their usual problem-solving techniques and strategies. The third phase is the *outcome* of the crisis situation. Thompson goes on to distinguish three different outcomes. *Improved steady state* means that people not only overcome the crisis situation, but are able to improve former problem solving strategies. In doing so, they learn new skills which can be applied when solving similar problems in the future. The second possible outcome of the crisis situation is the *resumed steady state*, when people are able to cope with the crisis situation (mostly with external support), but they cannot improve their own skills or develop their resources to overcome the problem in the future. The *decreased steady state* refers to the life condition when individuals cannot overcome the given crisis situation, and problems become permanent and seriously affect the daily life of affected people in the long run.

The state of vulnerability "*refers to individuals or groups that are in a zone in which functionality is secured but at the limits of available resources*" (SPINI et al., 2013: 8). According to Thompson's crisis model, this running-down of resources is a consequence of hazardous events that threaten the steady state. Stress and crisis situations mean permanent danger for the social wellbeing and mental health of people living on the edge. The literature on vulnerabilities differentiates between *manifest and latent vulnerabilities*. Manifest vulnerability incorporates the lack of physical resources (e.g., housing or income) that causes precarious living conditions in a direct and visible way. Latent vulnerabilities, such as the lack of social relationships or institutional support, appear in less visible forms, but they can have

as big an effect on precarity as in the case of manifest vulnerabilities (MCCROY and VIDING, 2015: 493).

Through his theory on the relational nature of deprivations, Amartya Sen (2000) highlights how various forms of vulnerabilities (missing resources) can lead to severe social exclusion (or unfair inclusion). For example, hunger can originate from a crop failure caused by drought. Hunger also can occur because of the lack of income that leads to low purchasing power of people. The co-existence of increasing prices and low income can also result in hunger. And finally, hunger can be the result of the withdrawal of food subsidies from the neediest groups. Thus, hunger can be traced back to multiple deprivations: “*being excluded from enjoying a normal crop, being excluded from employment, exclusion from the food market and exclusion from food subsidy arrangements*” (Sen, 2000: 11).

Destitution is the result of the accumulation of multiple (individual and systemic) vulnerabilities during the life course, when the individual and group-based coping strategies, as well as the institutional mechanisms of prevention fail. This accumulation of vulnerabilities (FERRARO, 2011) embedded in a specific political context lead to life situations where people are not able to cope with problems using their available material and non-material resources. The multidisciplinary analysis of diverse vulnerabilities – including their pathways to destitution – is unavoidable. Such an examination can reveal the sophisticated biological, social and psychological components (BALTES et al., 1998) behind destitution by focusing on the combination and accumulation of vulnerabilities during the life course.

According to the European Commission’s 2014 report on destitution and migration as well as the study of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS 2010), destitution can be differentiated from poverty and social exclusion based on the accumulation of multiple vulnerabilities that characterise the condition. According to this approach, poverty primarily expresses material deprivation and social exclusion means a kind of social non-participation. Besides these forms of vulnerabilities, destitution also includes the inability of individuals to improve their own situation and change their life in the way they would like to. Both reports considered homelessness as the final destination of accumulated vulnerabilities, and this comprises – among other vulnerabilities – the acute need for appropriate housing, too.

If destitution and homelessness are accompanied by the status as an undocumented migrant, then other, mostly system-level problems emerge that further exacerbate vulnerabilities (BARBU et al., 2020). In this case, destitution appears as a severe form of systemic social deprivation in which people are unable to sustain themselves and their families through their own work activities because they face various administrative and legal obstacles to entering the labour market. Destitute *sans-papiers* are thus excluded from most state-run social and medical services and their general access to public goods and institutions is very limited. The study of O’Connell and Brannen (2019: 166) – in which the authors examined the food insecurity of undocumented asylum seekers registered with the British Red Cross – clearly showed that people living in rich countries can also be threatened by severe destitution. Their report revealed that two thirds of asylum seekers who turned to the British Red Cross experienced hunger at least once a week and almost a quarter of the “*penniless*” refugees, who had not received any support from the state, suffered from hunger on a daily basis (pp.175).

Pathways to destitution

Although the notion of destitution has a considerable history in social sciences, its modern interpretation in developed countries is mostly applied when describing the plight of

undocumented migrants and homeless people living in shelters or on the street (rough sleepers). These disadvantaged social groups are the primary victims of global social changes occurring in the labour market and housing sector, and state-run services have only managed to alleviate but not eradicate their destitution.

Undocumented migrants

Migration from poor countries to wealthier ones is one of the most important causes of vulnerability and destitution (STRIANO and YOUNG, 2018; Dominelli, 2019). Migration is always a stressful procedure for the mobile people; however, it does not automatically lead to crisis, increased vulnerability or destitution, even in the case of vulnerable people. Stillman et al. (2009: 686) analysed the possible outcomes of migration on the mental health and well-being of poor people and concluded that besides the stressors, migration can also have several positive effects on the mental and economic status of migrants. This improvement is particularly true for migrating people leaving behind threatening living circumstances like war and famine in their home countries and finding better conditions in the host countries.

If people cross borders without papers or remain in the host country even after the expiry of their travel documents, and thus have to live without a residence permit in the target countries, they are mostly deprived of the support of *public relational spaces*, which means that they experience not only the personal aspects but the systemic forms of vulnerability and destitution. Sedmak (2019: 231) states that the primary reason behind the destitution of undocumented migrants can be traced back to the lack of access to legal systems, the labour market, healthcare facilities, education and the housing market.

According to the UN's World Migration Report, globally there are approximately 272 million people living as migrants, of which 20-30 million are undocumented migrants. Although the vast majority of undocumented migrants live in developing countries, the economically developed wealthy countries also have a considerable undocumented migrant population. In the USA more than 10 million people live without a clear migration status, and in the EU the estimated number of people without residence permit is 1.9 - 3.8 million (IOM, 2019). The number of undocumented migrants in Switzerland ranges between 50,000 and 180,000 according to various estimations (EPPLÉ and SCHÄR, 2015: 300). In the city of Zürich there are approximately 28,000 undocumented people, in Geneva this number is 13,000, in Basel 4,000, and 3,000 in Bern (MORLOK et al., 2015: 21). Although the vast majority of undocumented migrants originate from so-called third countries (outside the EU/EFTA region), the number of inter-EU migrants is steadily growing (EPPLÉ and SCHÄR, 2015). For these mobile people, the lack of organised residency status leads to multidimensional vulnerability factors that incorporate various housing, employment and health-related components.

In the area of the labour market, destitute migrants are often employed under precarious conditions in so-called 3D (dangerous, dirty and degrading) positions (BENACH et al., 2011). In particular, the economic sectors of care, construction and agriculture employ destitute mobile people, often under unpredictable, low-paid working conditions with no labour contract. For instance, currently approximately 30,000 Eastern European female caregivers work in Switzerland (MERCAY and GRÜNIG, 2016), 82,000 in Austria (BENZ, 2018) and 150,000 in Germany (CARITAS, 2020), often under very precarious conditions with low-wage and low-hour contracts (SCHILLIGER, 2015). In the city of Zürich, 30 percent of all household-related jobs (performed by non-household members) are conducted by immigrant women, often *sans papiers*.

Destitute people mostly leave their homes for economic reasons and due to social insecurity (EVANS et al., 2018). However, the lack of economic and other resources, such as poor education, lack of qualifications, shortage of language skills, or a low level of self-sufficiency increase their vulnerability in the host countries as well (COX and PAWAR, 2006; ZELANO et al., 2015). Because of their vulnerability and precarious working conditions, destitute undocumented migrants often fall into a poverty trap in the target countries (STRIANO and YOUNG, 2018). Their position in the labour market becomes very weak, as they can only apply for jobs that require basic qualifications. Consequently, they are often victims of mental and physical exploitation (SCHOLTEN and OSTAIJEN, 2018).

Welfare states occasionally apply hostile socio-political measures (instead of mitigating the poverty trap) to prevent *welfare tourism* and deter poor migrants from accessing welfare services, although the notion of welfare support as a magnet for migrants has not thus far been confirmed by empirical studies (REEGER, 2018). Restrictive and punishing political actions (like forced deportations, or exclusion from basic social and medical services) against the mobile destitute can significantly decrease their well-being and subjective security in the host countries (MOSTOWSKA, 2014; HANSSON and MITCHELL, 2018; TEMESVARY, 2019).

In the case of destitute Central and Eastern European citizens moving to the West, after the expiry of temporary residence permits, they find themselves in a very particular legal situation and enter a legal limbo: they remain in the wealthy Western European countries without registration and thus they lose eligibility for most residency-based social transfers and services (FREEMAN and MIRILOVIC, 2016; GAISBAUER et al., 2019). As a result, destitute undocumented migrants experience structural social exclusion not only in their home countries, but even in the host countries: in their home countries, penalising social policies often disqualify them from social services, while in Western Europe protectionist welfare measures hamper their access to social and health services (WANG and ASPALTER, 2006; O’SULLIVAN, 2020). This dual form of structural exclusion significantly exacerbates destitution and hinders the social integration of migrating people (ESTÉVEZ, 2012; PILATI, 2016).

Despite the difficult legal status of destitute undocumented EU migrants, there exist international legal forums that attempt to guarantee their fundamental rights in a transnational context. The European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR, 2010) – for instance – openly and directly calls on EU/EFTA states to protect the rights of and to stop discrimination against destitute migrants. Referring to the Treaty of Rome, the Convention prohibits any form of discrimination based on social origin, national minority, gender and race in the area of the EU/EFTA. The sporadic forced deportation of destitute CEE people is contrary to the EU’s 2004/38 directive on the free movement of people. The European Social Charter (COUNCIL OF EUROPE 1961) calls for member states to respect the social rights of EU migrants and provide for their emerging social needs through local social services in cooperation with “*emigration and immigration states*”. The Charter also declares a ban on deportation and the right to family (re)union in the case of migrant workers. The declarations of the Charter were reinforced by the European Platform of Social Cohesion (2017). The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017) strengthens the EU’s commitment towards the rights of European citizens in the area of inter-European social protection, inclusion and housing assistance.

The OECD’s 2018 Social Protection Agenda also calls for the protection of the social rights of destitute migrants in the economically developed member states. The Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs regularly reviews the housing conditions, migration and homelessness of destitute people. The EEA/EFTA agreement (1994) declares a ban on discrimination against European migrants based on their nationality and this principle was reinforced in the 2019 amendment to the agreement. The ILO’s 2012 Social Protection Floor

Strategy motivates developed countries to provide minimum access to their medical and social services for all people (even for destitute migrants) living in the given country by giving them essential social rights (according to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, right to housing, employment, healthcare, etc.).

Despite the promising strategic efforts of international organisations to handle the situation of mobile destitute EU citizens arriving in economically highly developed countries, there are still hundreds of thousands of inter-EU migrants living in Western Europe under precarious living conditions characterised by material deprivation, low income and low work intensity.

Homeless people

In addition to the plight of undocumented migrants, urban homelessness (particularly street homelessness) is another primary factor behind destitution (DOMINELLI, 2019). Homelessness is a very severe form of poverty, social exclusion and destitution, a state of living where people cannot slip any lower and from where returning to take a place in society is extremely difficult. Homelessness is the most precarious station in the life trajectory of destitute people and is characterised with multiple vulnerabilities and structural disadvantages. However, even homelessness can be further stratified and *rough sleepers* can be differentiated from those living in insecure or inadequate housing conditions. According to the FEANTSA ETHOS typology on homelessness, the *roofless* are people sleeping in public places or at night shelters (AMORE et al., 2011: 28). *Roofless* people (also called *absolute homeless*) are excluded even from the system of homeless care, and are eligible only for the simplest low-threshold services like soup kitchens and day-care facilities (COOPER, 1995). *Roofless* people are the most vulnerable group even among the homeless as they are deprived of any housing possibilities.

Edgar (2009: 15) describes homelessness as a state of multiple deprivations which can be seen in three main domains: “*having a decent dwelling (or space) adequate to meet the needs of the person and his/her family (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations (social domain); and having exclusive possession, security of occupation and legal title (legal domain)*”. Based on Edgar’s approach, homelessness is a severe form of absent resources in the area of (1) housing and family life, (2) privacy and social relations and (3) structural and legal protection, which together cause multiple vulnerabilities and lead to the state of ultimate destitution. O’Sullivan (2019: 41) also highlights the importance of spatial deprivation in analysing homelessness and refers to rough sleeping as a “*wicked social problem*” that is often caused by punitive political reactions in which political actors “*annihilate public space*” excluding the most vulnerable groups from the only place they can stay. Extreme forms of political interventions that exacerbate the vulnerability of rough sleepers can be seen – for instance – in Hungary, where the government incorporated a prohibition on homeless people from sleeping on the street in the country’s constitution (EVANGELISTA, 2019: 321-323).

The intersectional analysis of homelessness reveals the relationship between severe housing needs and other vulnerability factors like gender and race, which in combination lead to destitution. Studies on homelessness from the USA (see MARR, 2015; ZUFFEREY, 2017) show that people of colour are in a particularly vulnerable situation compared to other homeless people, and this vulnerability can be identified (among others) in their difficult access to night-shelters and other low-threshold services.

In his study on ethnicity and homelessness, Győri (2017) scrutinised the living conditions of Hungarian Roma homeless people moving from the countryside to the cities. The study

concluded that the Roma suffer from extreme vulnerability compared to the non-Roma homeless as they have to face not solely severe financial, employment-related and housing hardships, but wider ethnic prejudices. Although the proportion of Roma in Hungarian society is approximately 5 percent, their proportion among the homeless is 33 percent. Győri concludes that the steadily growing number of Roma in the homeless population (and particularly among rough sleepers) can be traced back to the extreme vulnerabilities they experience in their ghettoised villages. Győri also states that shelters in cities provide the destitute Roma slightly better living conditions than their unheated and ruined shanties in the countryside.

Of course, it is not only the CEE region that is affected by system-based discrimination against the homeless Roma. O'Sullivan (2020: 68) identified social prejudices and ethnicity-based discrimination against homeless gypsy travellers in Ireland, particularly in the area of housing policy. Ethnic-based destitution in developed countries was scrutinised among others by Hansson and Mitchell (2013) when examining the plight of Roma rough sleepers in Stockholm as well as by Colombo et al. (2015) through the analysis of deprived Roma beggars in Geneva. This latter study also highlighted the relationship between destitution and the deprivation of basic social rights (due to the city's anti-beggar initiatives) that pushes impoverished Roma migrants into precarious living conditions.

Zufferey (2017) raised attention of the holistic nature of destitution when analysing homelessness from an intersectional perspective. She concluded that the destitution of the homeless can be traced back to multiple reasons besides financial and housing poverty. Factors like age, gender and ethnicity play a considerable role in the evolution of destitution and severe social exclusion. The importance of gender inequalities in the destitution of homeless women was thoroughly analysed by Mostowska and Dębska (2020) in Poland, Lengyel (2019) in Hungary and Lutz et al. (2017) in Germany. All of these studies concluded that the traditional social expectations and gender-based biases focused on women can contribute to special, precarious forms of women's homelessness (BARBU et al., 2020).

Consequences for the welfare state

The increased migration and homelessness of destitute people with multiple vulnerabilities means brand new challenges for the continuously changing Western welfare states (see GAISBAUER et al., 2019). Conventional state-run welfare services, originally designed to handle traditional forms of social needs, tend to be less effective in fighting novel forms of destitution and handling the needs of the "new poor" (SCHOLTEN and OSTAIJEN, 2018; ALLEN et al., 2020). Multidisciplinary studies on poverty show that destitution is the most precarious manifestation of accumulated social and mental vulnerabilities and it can be traced back to complex family, housing, employment and mental-health-related issues. Novel analyses of the role and functions of the postmodern welfare state underscore the responsibility of state-run social services for eradicating the vicious forms of poverty in the areas of the housing and labour markets, medical care, mental health support and other fields of welfare (see LEIBFRIED, 2015).

Despite the widespread national and international anti-poverty strategies, prevailing neoliberal and neoconservative welfare policies accept or at least tolerate destitution and even street homelessness as intrinsic characteristics of contemporary Western societies (SPOLANDER et al., 2014; STRIER, 2019). Based on this dominant neoliberal socio-political point of view and the paradigm of the social investment state (WAGAW et al., 2020), destitute people are the victims (or rather losers) of global social and economic changes, and they are unable to catch up with others in the competition for narrowing social and economic resources. Destitute people

are not always intentionally excluded from the redistribution arising from the increasing privatisation of community goods and public spaces, but they are the people who do not possess enough material and relational resources to get access to (formerly) public resources (TOSI, 2007).

Besides these neoliberal socio-political tendencies also political nationalism contributes to the exclusion of destitute people arrived from poorer countries. Protective social policies often close homelessness and other services from the newcomers excluding people even from the most essential supports like food and shelter. A typical such technique is when only people with residence permits are allowed to use soup kitchens or night shelters. Other measurements deters people from the labour markets of host countries or orient them toward precarious (low-wage and low-hour) positions as various examples from Germany, Belgium and Denmark highlight the issue (VALCKE, 2019).

As mentioned above, social institutions occasionally not only neglect the social needs of vulnerable groups, but appear as conductors of neoliberal or nationalist political agendas applying restrictive, protectionist measures against destitute people. The UN's report on extreme poverty calls these actions "*penalisation measures*" that aim at maintaining public order and restoring security in the community (UNDP, 2020). Wacquant (2007) analysed the role of penalising measures in handling urban poverty in Western Europe and the US. He concluded that the primary reason behind the formation of a new urban underclass is not necessarily the social marginalisation of disadvantaged social groups, but the deliberate withdrawal of neoliberal state services and policies that once supported the poor. As a result, state social policies shift from a social to a penal position. According to Evangelista (2019: 320) penalising social policies generally appear in three stages to regulate destitution and homelessness: (1) criminalisation, (2) hindering access to services, and finally (3) detention and expulsion. As already described, Hungary – for instance – first prohibited sleeping in public places for homeless people in the city centres often visited by tourists (BENCE and UDVARHELYI, 2013), and after the 2018 amendment of the constitution this ban was spread to the whole country and to all public spaces (GYŐRI, 2018). Street homelessness is now considered petty crime and homeless people risk being arrested and fined if they sleep rough. As an example for the nationalist tendencies in reshaping social policies, in Switzerland, the cities of Basel and Lausanne demand practically unaffordable fees for using the city's only night shelter from homeless people without a residence permit, therefore the undocumented are basically excluded from these services (TEMESVÁRY, 2019; MARTIN and BERTHO, 2020). In the larger cities of Germany mobile destitute EU citizens are threatened with expulsion, which is actually against EU law, but German authorities still carry out inter-EU deportations (PRODEC, 2018).

These examples show that Western welfare regimes are not yet prepared to handle destitution and instead governments at both local and national levels are tending to apply restrictive, punishing measures to deter destitute people from using public spaces. By doing so, the role of social policy is devaluated and very simplistic, order-based, penalising measures are applied by governments when handling difficult social problems. In Central and Eastern Europe, *emergency welfare states* (INGLOT, 2018) regularly apply penalising measures instead of comprehensive socio-political strategies to handle destitution (see – for instance – the deployment of police forces during the hunger riots by the Roma in Slovakia). In Western European welfare states the unpreparedness of the state (supplemented by augmented nationalist influences) can be identified in the organisational and methodological deficiencies of social services when managing the problem. The lack of comprehensive socio-political strategies to handle destitution also can be seen at EU-level. EU decrees and other regulations and strategies still do not discuss the concept of destitution nor its twin notions of absolute and

extreme poverty (GAISBAUER, 2019: 290). Since the 1993 Amsterdam Treaty (and later the Lisbon Treaty and the EU 2020 Strategy), the EU only considers poverty and social exclusion in a relative context and applies strategies to alleviate relative poverty.

The persistent focus of wealthy welfare states on eradicating relative poverty (and their ignoring of absolute poverty) can be seen in the statistics, too. Jenkins et al. (2013) showed that while relative poverty is typically falling in both the USA and the economically developed European countries, absolute poverty is stagnating or slightly growing. The data reveal that while welfare states were successful in improving the living conditions of people living in moderate poverty, they lost ground in raising and supporting the poorest layers of the society (absolute poor) through effective welfare services and transfers. The statistics also show the stubborn and sticky nature of destitution, namely that in Western societies there is a considerable and constant layer of people who are unable to break out of the vicious cycle of destitution and social marginalisation, and who are not supported by state-run services.

In the absence of comprehensive state-run social policies, it is nongovernmental organisations that develop effective services for supporting the destitute (even though these services often have to work under hostile governmental pressure). In some Central and Eastern European countries where governments limit their efforts to establishing refugee camps for undocumented destitute migrants, NGOs provide important support for mobile people through counselling, food distribution programmes and many other ways. And even in Western Europe, NGOs are often the only organisations to provide support for undocumented migrants and rough sleepers who are neglected by state-run social services.

Conclusion: Drafting destitution - a guiding model for research

The previous explanations highlight that in terms of knowledge it would be of benefit to include "destitution" as a theory-based specialised concept in poverty research and policy. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, in modern states "poverty" has become an increasingly differentiated phenomenon, which means that the term "poverty" can serve as an umbrella concept, but can no longer serve to capture the nuances of the differences and thus to combat "poverty" in all its various challenges. Destitution describes a situation that does not arise from the equal interaction of individual resources and structural conditions, as many other concepts of poverty do. Destitution is rather caused by a structural absence of regard for people, which is mainly due to migration and socio-political reasons and which the people affected cannot confront with any options for action to improve their own lives. Destitution must therefore be thought of in terms of the life chances that a state enables or does not enable through its welfare state.

Secondly, "destitution" outlines a dynamic process affecting people that usually leads to a dead end. No longer having control over one's own life and being dependent on the goodwill of others, means no longer being able to take advantage of existing options. Changes that have a positive effect on life chances can then only be initiated to a very limited extent by those affected. They depend much more on the context and thus on the national and regional conditions of the respective welfare state.

Thirdly, the perspective of "destitution" leads to a re-sorting of concepts in poverty research in order to clarify the target scenario of the connection between situation, structure and process. In this paper, it has become clear that this involves "objectively measurable" concepts such as "existential poverty", "vulnerability" or "entitlements", but also "subjectively hermeneutic" concepts such as "embeddedness" or "exclusion" and legal conditions such as "social rights". It

is thus clear that "destitution" is nourished by various concepts and theoretical positions and can thus be connected to previous research traditions.

Figure 1 aims to clarify our understanding that it is the socio-political structural conditions that have been identified as causes in the concept of "destitution". We call them the "status structuring domains". The first domain, "welfare", includes the "rules of the game" of the welfare state, which in the current paradigm of investment in human capital when there is a benefit for the state. Destitute citizens do not belong to this target group; here, offers (e.g., of emergency aid) are granted for purely compensatory motives (to prevent an even more serious living situation from arising).

The second domain, "services", also usually denies access to the people affected. Providers of services often operate with a citizenship requirement that a priori excludes the destitute people. It is worth mentioning that this principle runs through the entire service landscape, i.e., it is applied by both state actors and non-state actors.

The third status structuring domain of destitution covers objectively enforceable rights. They are stipulated, for example, in the UN Covenants or the General Declaration of Human Rights and apply to individuals only to a very limited extent. Often they are actively denied because, according to the territorial principle, the destitute individuals are not included by the decision-makers.

And the fourth domain identified is the embeddedness in any political, economic and social processes. Destitute people are not seen and not represented, there is no lobby – they are politically concealed and thus they simply do not appear in the problem description of the welfare state. This ontological ignorance leads to an absence of statistics regarding the problem, and thus to the inability to act to create a policy that aims at embeddedness.

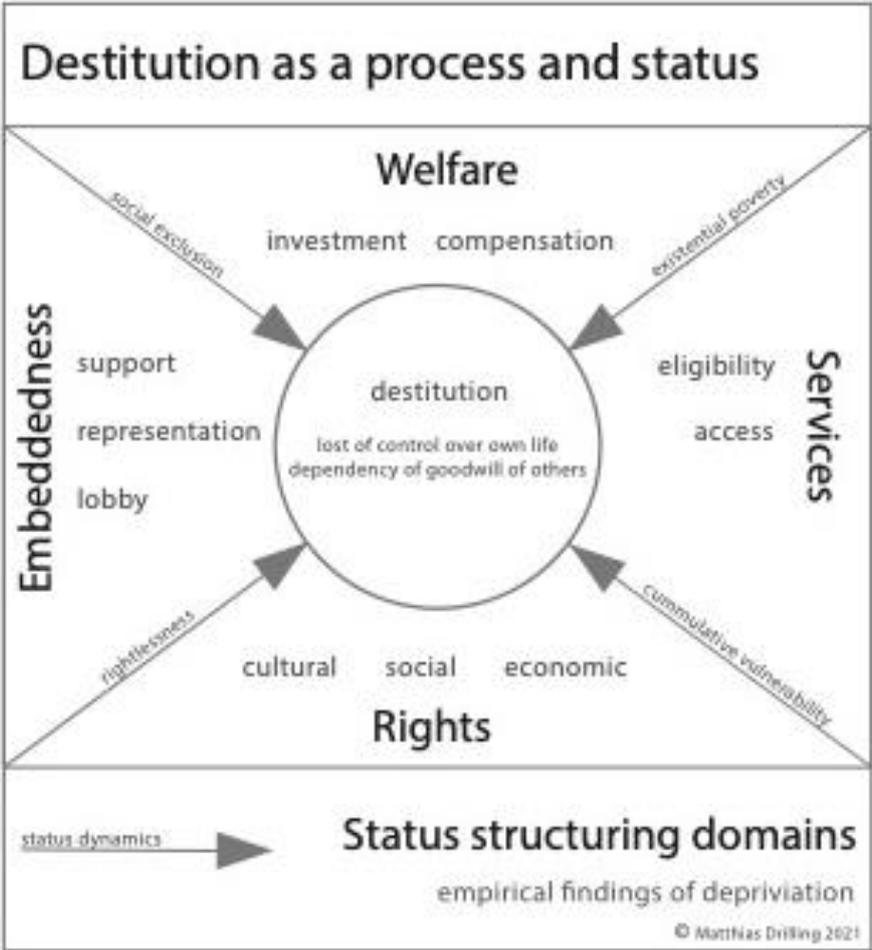


Figure 1: Destitution as a process and status

These status structuring domains result in the processes of rightlessness, social exclusion, accumulated vulnerability and existential poverty highlighted in the literature. The overlapping of these processes is particularly noteworthy. The current state of knowledge shows that this process is irreversible and ends with the loss of all control by the individual over his or her life, the non-existence of decision-making alternatives and the dependence on the goodwill of others (because of the absence of structural measures, it is goodwill that provides support, and not social policy or rights).

Summary

The notion of *destitution* was first applied by early studies on poverty to illustrate multi-level absolute poverty in the industrial societies. In its new meaning destitution is a novel (or newly invented) expression to describe multidimensional existential poverty and severe social exclusion in the wealthy countries. In its modern sense, destitution refers to the poorest among the poor, the lowest layer of the society who are abandoned by the state and unable to improve their living conditions on their own. Thus, besides the individual reasons (the lack of individual resources) destitution also has a considerable structural characteristic (in the public-relational space) showing the inability of state-run services in supporting the most vulnerable groups. The approach of destitution challenges the dominant distribution-based neoliberal theories of the late 20th century which originate poverty from the lack of financial and material resources. Destitution describes the most severe forms of poverty as the lack of essential resources in the area of psychical and mental health, employment, housing, income and cultural goods alike.

Reinventing the concept of destitution into practical social policies would be extraordinarily important as while western welfare states were able to diminish relative poverty in the last couple of decades, absolute poverty is stagnating or still growing in the wealthy countries. As a result, destitute people, who are unreachable by most welfare services for different reasons, are tending to make up a considerable and steadily growing layer of western societies. They are not only abandoned by the welfare state, but even their fundamental social rights are questioned.

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