

Denial of Universal Human Material Needs and Aversion to the Homeless¹

Naomi Zack
University of Oregon

Basic-need materialism and value-materialism

In our culture, some kinds of physical things that cost money are required to satisfy universal basic human material needs, for example adequate food, and shelter for privacy, security, and protection from weather. In contrast to this basic-need materialism is a value-materialism concerning physical objects that are desired more for their non-material properties than for their need-satisfying material ones. The material need-satisfying properties may not even be noticed by average consumers of, for example, exotic bottled waters, designer jeans, or luxury houses and hotel rooms. Jean Baudrillard describes this very well, albeit pessimistically:

They have turned consumption into a dimension of status and prestige, of useless keeping up with the Joneses or simulation, of potlatch which surpassed use value in every way. A desperate attempt has been made from all sides (official propaganda, consumer societies, ecologues and sociologues) to instil in them sensible spending and functional calculation in matters of consumption, but it is hopeless.²

At the same time that the relatively affluent satisfy their basic needs by practicing their value materialism, they share a tendency to remain unaware of the reality of basic need-materialism or to deny it. For example, while eating a gourmet meal in a high-end restaurant, the service and ambiance, how the food is presented, how it tastes, and seeing and being seen by other patrons may be more important than satisfying hunger. Those who can afford more expensive versions may have a slight contempt for tap water, simple food, and plain lodging, contempt that ignores the basic material need-satisfying properties of the humble versions of such objects. And that contempt and oversight subtly imply that those who consume the more expensive versions do not have the same basic needs as those who make do with the humble versions. The contempt and oversight of universal basic material needs is a form of denial of those needs, to the extent that the needs are material. Everyone needs the materials of water, food, and shelter but the focus on the non-material values of objects providing them (for the sake of status and prestige), can contribute to a delusion that one's basic needs are psychological and social only and not at all physical.

The denial of basic-need materialism by those who easily meet their basic needs, reinforces the high value placed on the non-physical properties of certain necessary objects. One result is a devaluation of those who do not have the material wherewithal to satisfy their basic needs according to elite or preferred cultural norms. That is, if one dismisses and contemns cheap food and lodging, it is a small extension of the attitude toward those things to look down on those who have to make do with them.

Having a home goes beyond value-materialism into universal psychological and social needs. All human beings share a need for a life with others, for relationships with relatives, friends, animals, and neighbors, which usually occur in the same physical locations. In a non-nomadic society such as ours---even those who move frequently make a permanency of their temporary locations---these psychological and social connections are importantly connected to the idea of home, as materially located in a constant place, a *relation-place*. The strong normativity of having a relation-place---“Thou shalt have a home”---is a kind of absolute. Those who struggle along with cheap food and sub-standard housing may suffer within the range of harshness, exploitation, and cruelty, which afflicts the poor, but they are still accorded minimal respect, as in the expression, “working poor.” To be a member of the “working poor” may entail many disadvantages, but it is also likely to garner charitable praise as “deserving.” However, when the poor lose their housing, even if they continue to work, respect is replaced by active aversion and contempt.

The difference between the poor with housing and those without is quantitative in terms of monetary income, but radically qualitative insofar as the homeless are rendered abject. To understand how that works, we should consider several historical aspects of American homelessness and further explore how value materialism and relation-place normativity result in the extreme negative attitudes of those with more than adequate shelter toward the homeless. This process will reveal our societal inability to address basic-need materialism for everyone at this time, because we have become so committed to and dependent on value-materialism (as a high importance placed on the non-material aspects of certain material objects).

Historical aspects of homelessness in the United States

Since the 1980s, homeless people in the United States have been stereotyped as drug addicted, alcoholic, mentally ill, criminal, or too lazy to work. Contemporary application of this general pathologization usually posits the homeless as passive objects who *in their mere*

existence, fail to meet or violate the life norms of law-abiding citizens who have homes, families, and jobs.³ By contrast, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the homeless were vocally opposed to middle class values and modern progress; in defending and valorizing their itinerant life styles, they actively contributed to their social outcast status. But whether regarded as passive or active, American homeless people have always lived in distinct sub-cultures, made up of interactions among themselves, survival in public spaces in society, and interactions with social service and law enforcement personnel. In emphasizing the natural sociality of human beings, it is often assumed that the homeless are something like “strays.” But, the well-documented historical and contemporary existence of sub-cultures among the homeless attests to the fact that despite their lack of stable and/or permanent relation-places homeless people are not without the sociality connoted by ideas of ‘home’.⁴

The conflict between relation-place normativity and homelessness was not a subject in public awareness until after the Civil War. The Civil War produced a large number of veterans who could not secure steady employment in one place. So they took to the roads and railroads as “tramps.” The freedom of these tramps from wage labor became part of an ideology for single men without families. They actively and vocally resisted what some saw as a national social movement toward domestic organization around a male bread winner. A family man was seen as “feminized” by his role and thereby deprived of the property in the labor of his wife and children, which belonged to him under an older system of patriarchy.⁵ The idea was widely circulated that “the reckless, free life of the army” had given these tramps “a taste for wandering and a distaste for every species of labor.”⁶

So as not to over-emphasize the independent rebellious life styles of such tramps and hoboes it should be remembered that between the Civil War and the 1930s, the concept of unemployment as an effect of downturns in the business cycle was not fully developed. For that concept to take root, employment had to be viewed as a healthy and positive social norm and supported as a public value. The public consensus that most people ought to have paid work, with government safety nets to take up gaps in the business cycle did not develop until the depression of the 1930s. During the Great Depression, 15 million or 1/3 of the nonfarm workforce was unemployed. Only ¼ of unemployed families received relief and hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions were homeless. Communities of shacks, known as “Hooverilles” sprung up throughout the United States; the largest, covering eight acres with a population of 1200, endured in Seattle from 1931-41.⁷

After World War II, federal housing programs and the G.I. Bill supported education for productive employment and individual home ownership in suburbia. Such programs were in part motivated by uneasiness about the social instability that could result if the 13 million returning troops were left to fend for themselves, as tramps or hoboes.⁸ But many of the single men who were excluded from this boom continued to occupy single rooms (SROs) in cheap hotels in large cities. By the late 1970s, the Reagan administration had introduced austerity measures to cut funding for social services and subsidized housing. In the name of ‘urban renewal,’ most forms of SRO housing were demolished or converted into condominiums. Consequently not enough housing was available for the urban poor and many began living on the streets (a population that famously included former mental institution inmates) as a permanent fixture of American urban life.⁹

There was a dramatic shift in the demographics of the homeless from the late 19th to the late 20th century. Before the Great Depression, the voice of hoboes and “forgotten men” was precisely an assertion of their own identity as not being women, black, Asian, Italian, Polish, and so forth. During the Great Depression of the 1930s and after dislocation caused by the demolition of cheap housing beginning in the late 1970s, homeless women and children received new attention, as did homeless families, who remain ongoing contemporary casualties of housing scarcity---along with military veterans, nonwhites, and the elderly. The large numbers of children and teenage runaways among the contemporary homeless increases the overall vulnerability of this entire population.¹⁰ However, although each disadvantaged component of the homeless population has advocates and scholars who study their counterparts among the housed, they may become invisible as having distinct needs, after they become homeless.

Homelessness and the public-private distinction

In the 21st century, it is no longer expected that everyone has to have or belong to a home containing a heterosexual nuclear family and sole male breadwinner. A diversity of life styles is broadly accepted without controversy and relation-place need not be constant. Those who are homeless nonetheless continue to be relentlessly stereotyped by the pathologies of drug and alcohol addiction, mental illness, criminality, and laziness. Because these pathologies are not limited to those who we consider homeless, it makes sense to focus on the fact that the homeless today are primarily, as some advocates call them, the unhoused, or

those without dwellings under their control. Still, this is not to imply that being unhoused is a simple condition.

Being unhoused, despite a general relaxation of relation-place normativity, does violate a societal distinction between public and private. Sleeping, eating one's self-prepared food, washing, excreting, engaging in sexual acts, and taking care of one's personal possessions, are daily biological and physical functions that are part of what is private. Exceptions are made for picnics, camping, tailgate parties, scripted displays of nudity, and high art installations, but all of those activities are recreational or optional and not part of hum-drum daily serious, socially responsible life in society.

It is expected that people will perform their daily biological and physical functions within walls, shielded from public view. There are two parts to this expectation: the majority of the public, who perform those functions in their dwellings, do not wish to view others performing them in public; the functions are expected to be shielded from public view as a primary requirement not only for respectability in terms of social status, but for respect to one's person. Thus, the homeless are forced by their circumstances to perform a radical unconventionality that is deemed by the majority not only to fall beneath respectability but to be unworthy of individual respect. The majority is not so much concerned about the literal lack of the shielding walls experienced by the unhoused, but is directly and viscerally offended by what can be seen in the absence of these walls. And because of this direct offense to one of its most broad assumptions about civilized life, the public assumes that the homeless are criminal, not only in the bare fact of their unhoused status, but as a disposition to commit crimes against housed persons. What the public overlooks is that the walls it takes for granted as respectably dividing what is biologically and physically private from what is public, cost money. The public does not focus on the fact that the homeless or permanently unhoused cannot afford housing and the result is a kind of "let them eat cake" attitude toward the homeless.

Having a home ensures a private space that is necessary not only for biological refreshment---what Marxists call the reproduction of labor---but for social and political activities outside of the private space. When writers emphasize the importance of a private space for autonomy and distinctively human flourishing,¹¹ the home or private dwelling is viewed as an instrumentality for what is done outside the home.¹² For instance, there is a long Euro-American history of the requirement of property ownership to vote. Homeless people

are now permitted to vote from nominal addresses in some U.S. jurisdictions (for example, by a tree, at a heating grate, or via a free-standing tin mailbox),¹³ but despite enough numbers to perhaps constitute a political interest, few do in fact vote or think about their situation as an issue to be addressed through political voice. And while many marginally employed Americans are in reality unhoused,¹⁴ about 75% of the homeless are unemployed.¹⁵

The social services now available to the unhoused often require long hours of travel by public transport and long hours waiting in line. Single women with young children who are homeless usually cannot arrange for the childcare that would enable them to work. While in principle the homeless could both work and participate politically, their unhoused condition results in inconveniences merging into hardships that are practical barriers to such activities taken for granted among the housed.¹⁶ Even a cursory understanding of the condition of being unhoused in contemporary society reveals its tedious and wasteful complexity.¹⁷

Aversion to those who perform their biological functions in public is an immediate surface reaction. The biological functions at issue, especially excretion and sleep, occur on the basis of need, which human beings are helpless in being driven to fulfil. Both the homed and homeless have the same needs but needs that cannot be fulfilled in ways that disguise their necessity are a source of contempt from others, perhaps because they remind them of their own helplessness. When needs are fulfilled in private, they can be put out of mind in public and their public visibility disrupts that order.

Human helplessness about universal needs becomes an obvious means for manipulation and coercion of the extreme poor, in general. And if the homeless have special needs, such as addictions, their vulnerability is exacerbated. Even in private or in interactions shielded from wider public view, the needs of the extreme poor are visible to others who have the will and ability to withhold their satisfaction in exchange for whatever they want from them---usually some form of work or sex.¹⁸

Our general inability to practice basic-need materialism

The foregoing analysis explains the reaction of the majority to the homeless, but it does not address the apparent intractability of the present problem of homelessness. To understand the apparent inability to solve this problem, we might further examine basic need materialism among the ‘homed.’

There is something very peculiar about basic-need materialism at this time, insofar as value-materialism has made it very difficult for *everyone* to practice in a full-blown capitalistic consumer society. Indeed, that basic-need material fulfilment can be viewed as a practice, analogous to the practice of value-need materialism, is another aspect of the total social constructivity of postmodernity. The affluent may preciously get back to basics in consuming versions of third world foodstuffs and living amongst and wearing handmade artifacts. But the middle class and poor spend a great deal of time and energy attending to their own basic material needs via value-materialist products. Despite the nearly-ubiquitous distribution of standardized types of things, everyone has to figure out the quickest, most gratifying, and cheapest ways to get what they “need.” Multiplying labor-saving devices and ever-new electronic marvels increasingly result in less leisure time, as soon as we take them for granted---and that means there is less time to sleep and fulfil other basic needs.

There are few high quality simple forms of food and housing and consumers make their choices according to competing pulls of advertising, marketing, peer pressure, and how much money they have. A huge number of choices for even insignificant objects is less a matter of freedom than a bewildering fog that each person has to work her way through before uniting with the right thing for her. All consumer products are the result of multiple prior transactions between capital and labor. Housing is not only shelter but an investment that can turn out badly and the cheapest food is the most highly processed and least nutritious. The point here is not to just gesture at what works like an incomprehensible and unpredictable system as a whole, but to suggest that this system does not guarantee or even offer basic-need fulfilment to anyone. A good trivial trope for it is faculty parking at a state university. For several hundred dollars a year, one may purchase a faculty parking permit. But the permit does not come with a designated space, so it is merely permission to park any place within a number of lots---if one has the time to search for a spot. If cars are like bodies, a homeless person is like someone with a car who cannot afford the permit, and is thereby banned from the scramble to park and get to important destinations.

The elimination of contemporary homelessness would likely require the construction of basic, cheap housing and the mass production of unprocessed nutritious food for a population of several million people.¹⁹ This could be done for a modest profit if government and charities were the purchasers on behalf of the homeless. However, there is no tradition or financial infrastructure for producing such objects. Instead, the present system supports high prices for substandard welfare slum housing, dormitory-style emergency shelters, food

pantries, and food stamps that are begrudged by those who don't need them. For both housing and food, the extreme poor are given limited access to some of the products of value-materialism. Such housing not only lacks the unnecessary frills of shelter but does not even fulfil necessities of structural safety, security, and hygiene. Food stamps give the homeless no less and no more than the same access to a wall of potato chips that the rest of us enjoy.

In our society, no effort is made and little financial incentive exists to efficiently satisfy basic material needs and do only that. Any success in such projects would be politically opposed by those who profit from the production of products catering to value materialism. Part of the motivation for tearing down SROs and giving developers free reign to create expensive housing where they stood was the belief that maintaining, improving, or increasing housing stock for the “disaffiliated” single male poor would be met by an increase in demand, to the detriment of the general work ethic and the American family.²⁰ In reality, now as then, the numbers of their consumers would swell if more basic need objects were available---to the detriment of those who profit from value materialism. In this sense, the public basic need frustrations of the unhoused are experienced in private by the housed. Our silence about this is part of the price of our relative affluence and that is part of why it shocks us to see others satisfy those needs in public. What we see is a synesthetic scream that is our scream, too. Still, this distressed recognition from our cocoons of relative privilege does not balance out the lack of curiosity, imagination, and concern that keeps us oblivious to the conditions of poverty resulting in homelessness. Housed or unhoused, the American poor live largely hidden from most of the relatively affluent, who although dimly aware that they exist, have no desire to learn more about their circumstances or help them out. Our indifference is thus another part of the price for our comfort.

End notes

¹ I am grateful to the graduate students and faculty audience of the Philosophy Department at the University of Oregon, for discussion when I gave this paper at the What is Materialism? conference at the UO in May 2014.

² Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities Or, The End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. by Paul Foss, John Johnston and Paul Patton, New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 45.

³ Tod Depastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.3-47.

⁴ All of the narrative accounts of homelessness describe sub-cultures. See for example: Kim Hopper, *Reckoning with Homelessness*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003; Jason Adam Wasserman and Jeffrey Michael Clair, *At Home on the Street: People, Poverty and a Hidden Culture of Homelessness*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2010.

⁵ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, pp. 115-16.

⁶ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, pp. 18-19

⁷ Pacific Northwest Labor Civil Rights Project, The University of Washington, "The Great Depression in Washington State, Hooverville and Homelessness" <https://depts.washington.edu/depress/hooverville.shtml>

⁸ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, pp. 226-230;

⁹ Peter H. Rossi, *Down and Out in America*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989. pp. 27-44 On the housing and safety net changes during the Reagan administration, see also Gregg Barak, *Gimme Shelter: A Social History of Homelessness in Contemporary America*, New York, NY: Praeger, 1991, pp. 66-71.

¹⁰ On children among the homeless, see Kirsten Anderberg, *21st Century Essays on Homelessness*, Ventura, CA, Seaward Press, 2011.

¹¹ David E. Schrader, "Home is Where the Heart Is: Homelessness and the Denial of Moral Personality," in John Abbarno, ed. *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, pp. 49-64.

¹² See, for instance, Joseph Betz's analysis of the deprivations of homelessness, drawn from Hannah Arendt's analysis of labor, work, and action, in Joseph Betz, "The Homeless Hannah Arendt," in Abbarno, ed. *The Ethics of Homelessness*, pp. 217-232.

¹³ See Anita M. Superson, "The Homeless and the Right to Public Dwelling," in Abbarno, ed., *Ethics of Homelessness*, pp. 147-8.

¹⁴ See Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, New York, NY : Henry Holt, 2001. Ehrenreich relates meeting minimum wage restaurant employees who lived in their vehicles.

¹⁵ Employment figures for the homeless have been about 25% in the twenty-first century. See updates and discussion at National Coalition for the Homeless, <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/index.html>. However, there are varied forms of sporadic self-employment pursued by the homeless, as well as extreme poor, for example, collecting containers for recycling. See Teresa Gowan, *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

¹⁶ For an account of ongoing shelter dwelling, see, Ralph da Costa Nunez, *A Shelter is Not a Home ...Or Is It?: Family Homelessness in New York City*, New York, NY: White Tiger Press, 2010.

¹⁷ The tedium and wastefulness in time and human energy of both the nature of service (restaurant) employment of the extreme poor in Paris and the restrictions on where and when homeless people could sleep in England was trenchantly analysed by George Orwell in his 1933 *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Penguin Classics, 2001.

¹⁸ Well known are stories of female prostitutes who are semi-indentured by pimps who supply them with drugs. Less attention has been paid to the semi-indentured plight of itinerant farm workers who quickly become indebted to their employers after they are encouraged to consume alcohol and cocaine as a relief from harsh working conditions and isolation. See Steven Vanderstaay, *Street Lives: An Oral History of Homeless Americans*, Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1992, pp. 51-54.

¹⁹ For contemporary statistical information on U.S. homelessness, see: Homeless Research Institute National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness in America, 2013, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/the-state-of-homelessness-2013> According to this report, the present rate of homelessness is 20 in 10,000 or 1 in 500. Other sources put the figure higher. According to a National Coalition for the Homeless 2007 national study, there are between 1.5 and 3.5 million homeless people in the United States, a range approaching 1 in 100. See:

National Coalition for the Homeless, "How many people experience homelessness?" July, 2009. http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/How_Many.pdf

²⁰ Depastino, *Citizen Hobo* pp. 230-243. Late 20th century urban renewal projects were in part justified as discouraging the rootless life styles of people living alone and encouraging family life, so it is a great irony that the present homeless population is now recognized to include families and children.