

## **Homelessness, citizenship and need interpretation: reflections on organizing with homeless people in Hungary**

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### **Abstract**

*Hungarian grassroots activist group The City is for All is the joint effort of members directly affected by homelessness or housing poverty and their allies (activists with secure housing), who work together for the right to housing. The following paper provides reflections on the group's work and politics by one of its founding members. It is introduced with a summary of the social context in which the group operates (the emergence of mass homelessness after the transition and its management by the state), which is followed by a detailed account of the group's internal organization and main activities. The next section examines the dynamics of inter-class cooperation within the group. The final section offers tentative theoretical interpretations on the politics of the group. The paper does not seek to address a specific research question, its goal instead is to provide an insider—but at the same-time self-reflective, and to a certain extent, theoretically inspired—view on the group in a way that can be useful for other organizers and politically engaged social scientists who are interested in building inter-class alliances in social justice activism.*

**Keywords:** homelessness, housing poverty, evictions, activism, Hungary, inter-class cooperation, organic public sociology, linguistic domination, politics of need interpretation

### **1. The social context: homelessness in Hungary**

#### **1.1. The emergence and reproduction of mass homelessness**

Homelessness was not officially addressed by social policy before the regime change of 1989/1990, though the term “homeless” was used regularly in lower lever administrative documents, and the hidden practices of social care (coupled with criminalization) did provide shelter for homeless people in state-run workers' hostels and social care homes (Horváth 2008). Mass homelessness emerged in Hungary in the years of the transition from “socialism” to free market capitalism, with deindustrialization and the corresponding sharp rise in joblessness, the quick decline in the number of beds in workers' hostels and in the prevalence of subletting of rooms and beds (both of which provided minimal housing options for those in dire need), the decriminalization of unemployment

and alcoholism (and a partial amnesty), and the loss of thousands of beds in mental health institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The main structural reason behind the emergence as well as the permanence of mass homelessness was the gap that arose between incomes and the cost of housing. Housing, to a significant degree, was a state controlled good before 1990; and while the allocation of housing subsidies was an important example of how the regime's social policy *reproduced*—and even *increased*—social inequalities (Szelényi 1983; Manchin and Szelényi 1987), housing affordability was managed through a system in which the bureaucratically set wages did not cover the costs of housing, but the prices of rent and utilities were kept low through extensive consumer subsidies (Hegedüs and Tosics 1996).

The transition brought along the re-commodification of labor as well as of housing; however, while in the case of housing, this meant the disintegration of the previous housing model, including a sharp decline of subsidies and a sharp increase in household energy prices (a fourfold increase in the early 1990s and an altogether twelvefold increase in the decade); the re-commodification of labour meant a massive increase in joblessness and decreasing real wages and incomes. State withdrawal from the field of housing took place at the very time when—because of the “social costs of the transition”—the need for it would had been even more than before.

Furthermore, the rapid mass privatization of the municipal housing stock in a generous “right to buy” fashion not only redistributed an immense wealth to those already privileged by the earlier system of housing policy, and increased inequalities in its own right by distributing higher than average “privatization gifts” to those with higher education, income and wealth (Dániel 1995). It also severely limited the subsequent possibilities of public housing provision. The share of municipal public housing shrank from 22 percent to 3 percent of the total housing stock: what remained is usually housing in the worst condition with the poorest residents (who, without savings, could not afford to buy their home even at the offered low prices). As it has long been argued by Titmuss (1968), services offered solely to the poor will soon become *poor services*: the renewal of the municipal housing stock is minimal, the housing units are often in unacceptable condition, and local authorities often try to reduce their maintenance costs by getting rid of their poorer tenants (often within the framework of urban renewal programs) or by further privatization (Ladányi 2000; Czirfusz and Pósfai 2015). Furthermore, the remaining 113 thousand public housing units are only partially allocated on the basis of social criteria, and even those are sometimes defined in a way to exclude those most in need. While evictions from public housing (the number of which has been sharply increasing) is a significant source of homelessness, homeless people—with

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<sup>1</sup> On the emergence of mass homelessness, see (in Hungarian): Győri 1990; Iványi 1994; Oross 1996; Mezei 1999; Győri 2008; Misetics 2016.

sporadic exceptions through “Housing first” projects specifically targeted to them—have virtually no chance to access public housing (Fehér, Somogyi and Teller 2012).

While the lack of a considerable public housing stock could have been substituted for by an adequate system of demand-side rental subsidies or housing allowances, nothing in this vein has evolved in Hungary (Hegedüs and Teller 2004). Regulation on private renting and rent setting can be characterized as markedly liberal (Lux and Puzanov 2012), and even that regulation is commonly disregarded, with the consequent insecurity of private renting (Hegedüs, Horváth and Teller 2014). Since 1990, low-income households who could not own a property have been mostly left alone to struggle with increasingly adverse market conditions, and the state failed to adequately address the systemic causes of indebtedness and homelessness as well.

This was not only a failure to act, but also a flawed design of housing policies which have been operating: indeed, a predominant cause of prevailing housing poverty as well as of the reproduction of homelessness has been the extremely unjust distribution of state support for housing. In the 1990s as well as in the early 2000s and currently, housing-related state expenditures have been showing an extreme bias in favor of the middle- and upper-classes, and against the lower classes and the poor (see Dániel 1997; Hegedüs 2013; Misetics 2017).

## **1.2. State response to homelessness**

Two and a half decades ago, in the winter of 1989-1990, protests, sit-ins and the well-publicized occupation of major train-stations by homeless people all made it obvious to the Hungarian public that there is a crisis. Homelessness emerged as a public issue in the peculiar historical moment in which the “socialist” regime was already in the business of undoing itself, but the perception of social problems and of the corresponding state responsibilities was still much under the influence of the social sensibilities and political understandings cultivated by the previous “welfare dictatorship” (Bartha 2012). As one of the intellectual allies of the homeless protesters put it in his recollections: “The final goal could not have been anything else than the state treating the homeless so that you are a citizen of this country, and your status of citizenship makes you entitled to live and to be housed” (quoted in Iványi 1997, 17). The homeless protesters, with banners such as “We are human too”, indeed demanded jobs and *housing*.

While homeless protesters did not succeed on the housing front, an elaborate system of state-sponsored shelters, drop-in centers and outreach social work programs did evolve, partially because of the disruption and publicity they achieved for the cause. Large, dormitory-style shelters opened in abandoned buildings, unused basements, recently closed worker's hostels, military barracks, in the wooden shacks of the campsite of the disbanded Communist Youth League and even inside a huge vessel originally built for war reparation to

the Soviet Union. These responses, which laid down the basis of the contemporary homeless assistance system, resembled, and often still resemble emergency relief in case of unexpected (natural) disasters, rather than social policy. Still, in comparison to 1989, when even in Budapest there was only 16 male and 8 female shelter beds available specifically for homeless people, and one single temporary home for families, today just in the capital there are around 5 thousand people living in overnight shelters and temporary hostels, and the capacity of the homeless-assistance system is more than twice as much country-wide. The provision of shelters, temporary hostels and day-time centers for homeless people became a legal obligation of larger local authorities, and there is also an extensive system of state-funded network of street social work services.

Besides the emergence of this homeless assistance system, the 1990s were characterized by informal police harassment of fluctuating intensity without any attempt to legalize the practice (Udvarhelyi 2014). Things changed fundamentally after the new government took office in 2010, however.

The new right-wing parliamentary supermajority implemented a comprehensive punitive, inegalitarian turn in social policies (Szikra 2014; Scharle and Szikra 2015). A detailed account of the post-1990 retrenchment of the Hungarian welfare state is beyond the scope of this article, but since it is a predominant part of the context the activist group under consideration has to operate in, it's worth noting that Hungary and Greece were the only OECD countries in which real public social spending has *decreased* in the years of the most recent crisis (OECD 2014), and that the level of increase in income inequalities in Hungary since 2010 is unmatched by any other EU countries.<sup>2</sup> Beside welfare retrenchment, the other predominant aspect of the Hungarian context with respect to grassroots organizing is the government's attack on pluralism and the rule of law, and its colonization of state institutions, including the Constitutional Court (see Bánkuti, Halmai and Scheppele 2012) – which is clearly demonstrated by the criminalization of homelessness.

Beside the government's bluntly inegalitarian social policies, the criminalization of homelessness became codified after 2010. In November 2010, new legislation defined the purposes of public spaces, and authorized local authorities to pass ordinances prohibiting their use for any other activity. Notably, the official rationale for the legislation provided by the Ministry of the Interior gave only one example of such other activity: the "habitual residing of homeless people" in public spaces. In 2011, several local authorities took the opportunity and passed ordinances that made it illegal to "use public spaces for habitually residing there", and the Law on Misdemeanours subsequently criminalized street homelessness in the whole country in the end of that year.

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<sup>2</sup> Own calculation of the change of gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income between 2010 and 2015 (EU-SILC data).

In 2012, when judges unilaterally appointed by the ruling party were still in the minority, the Constitutional Court ruled that the criminalization of homelessness lacks any constitutional justification, and declared that “homelessness is a social problem which the state must handle within the framework of the social administration and social care instead of through punishment”.<sup>3</sup> This victory did not last long, however. Within days, the prime minister announced that the government would not comply with the decision because it was “impractical”. And with the Fourth Amendment to the Fundamental Law (in 2013), the governing party’s supermajority vengefully introduced into the constitution several pieces of legislation which had previously been ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, including the (possibility of the) criminalization of homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

Since the October of 2013 there have been over 500 occasions in which homeless people were charged with a misdemeanor for the sole reason of sleeping rough. Of such charges, even one would be too many, of course, and these numbers underestimate the prevalence of police harassment, as the legislation is mostly used for what the police would be and was doing anyway without any legislative authorization: to force homeless citizens to move away from particular public spaces. Still, it seems that the legislation that criminalizes homelessness has not been aggressively enforced, leaving not criminalization, but “shelterization” as the dominant state response to homelessness.

We should return to the question of why the criminalization of homelessness is of such importance nonetheless, after introducing *The City is for All*, one of the main ongoing campaigns of which has been against the criminalization of homelessness.

## **2. Introducing *The City is for All***

### **2.1. The foundation of AVM**

*The City is for All* (or as it will be referred to subsequently, after its original Hungarian name *A Város Mindenkié*, AVM) is the joint effort of members directly affected by homelessness or housing poverty and their allies (activists with secure housing), who work together for the right to housing, against the discrimination of homeless people, and against the criminalization of homelessness. AVM has been organizing campaigns, protests and non-violent but disruptive direct actions since 2009 around all sorts of social injustices related to homelessness and housing. While for years the group’s activities were mostly confined to Budapest (the capital of Hungary), since 2015, there is also a partially independent subgroup operating in Pécs (a major town in the South of

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<sup>3</sup> 38/2012. (XI. 14.) Constitutional Court decision.

<sup>4</sup> For a more information on the criminalization of homelessness in Hungary, see Bence and Udvarhelyi 2013; Misetics 2014; Udvarhelyi 2014a.

the country). The group usually has around 30 active members, who regularly participate in weekly meetings.

AVM's approach to homelessness is structural and political. It cultivates and promotes an articulate diagnostic and prognostic framing (see Snow and Benford 1998; Cress and Snow 2000) on homelessness and housing deprivation, which locate their causes in the structure of power and distributive inequalities and demands radical egalitarian housing policy reforms from the state to address these. This framing of homelessness is centered around the notion of right to housing: homelessness, housing deprivation and evictions are understood to constitute the violation of rights, and the recognition of the right to housing is AVM's main demand and goal. While AVM also steps up for incremental reforms, its main policy demands, beside the codification and institutionalization of an enforceable right to housing, includes the prohibition of evictions without the provision of an adequate alternative; an extensive social housing sector; a country-wide housing allowance and debt-assistance program; and the utilization of vacant housing units. It follows from this political approach to homelessness that while AVM does provide some forms of direct assistance to homeless people or to families threatened by eviction, its main focus is political work, which emphasizes protest and includes the use of disruptive tactics.



**Figure 1: The annual housing march of AVM (2017)**  
Source: AVM. Photo by Gábor Bankó.

AVM was initiated in 2009, partially inspired by a Bronx-based advocacy group, Picture the Homeless (PTH)<sup>5</sup> which was founded by homeless people on the principle that “the voices and leadership of homeless people is critical to educate the public and mobilize the political will to target resources in the struggle to end homelessness”.<sup>6</sup> The initiators of AVM have known each other from having been involved in an earlier grassroots housing advocacy group which worked towards the right to housing and against the criminalization of homelessness since 2005. This activist group, however, did not include as members people who are themselves homeless or living in housing poverty.<sup>7</sup>

The founding of the group was decided upon after a three-day-long workshop held in the August of 2009 in Budapest by activists of Picture the Homeless and to which fifteen homeless people and fifteen non-homeless supporters (mainly social workers and activists) were invited.<sup>8</sup> After the workshops, the participants decided with consensus that instead of following the model of PTH, where only homeless people can be members (though that rule does not apply to paid organizers and other staff members who make many of the day-to-day operative decisions), AVM would be founded and operated together by homeless and non-homeless activists.<sup>9</sup>

Since then, AVM developed an inner organizational system in which homeless and non-homeless people (subsequently referred to as “ally” members or activists, in accordance with the group’s own terminology) work together. This initial organizational decision raised several questions on how the inner reproduction of power inequalities (between extremely poor and middle-class or highly educated and poorly educated activists) can be avoided or at least mitigated (which will be discussed later).

Still, most of AVM’s members have been homeless or directly affected by housing poverty: living in deprived, unsecure, overcrowded or unhealthy housing, including informally built shacks, usually on squatted public land, threatened by eviction, etc. The involvement of homeless people in organizing

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<sup>5</sup> On Picture the Homeless, see “A Conversation on Organizing Models for Social Justice Struggles in the City” (Hughes, Peace and Meter 2010, 79-84).

<sup>6</sup> <http://picturethehomeless.org/home/about/early-history-and-founders/>

<sup>7</sup> About the group, *Az Utca Embere* [The Man on the Street] in English see Udvarhelyi and Nagy 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Initially, the idea that people “from America” were coming to teach homeless people might have played an important role in mobilizing homeless participants. It is also worth noting that several of the homeless participants had already had experience in some sort of community work through their involvement in *Fedél Nélkül* [Roofless], a street newspaper initiated, written and distributed by homeless people.

<sup>9</sup> The group was initiated by Éva Tessza Udvarhelyi, Anna Bende, Bálint Vojtonovszki and the author, and was founded by the participants of the aforementioned workshops.

and operating AVM not only provides its essential ethos, but it is also one of the features which distinguishes it from the variety of NGO-s and religious organizations in Hungary which work with homeless people, as well as from the increasing number of grassroots volunteer initiatives which provide food and blankets to those sleeping rough. While these organizations play a predominant role in *providing services* for homeless people,<sup>10</sup> homeless people are usually not in any way involved in their organization or operation.<sup>11</sup>

## **2.2. AVM's internal organization**

AVM is entirely based on volunteer work: it does not have any paid staff, not even an office space. It does not have formal leadership, and it is also not a legally registered organization. While it occasionally applies for small grants (which do not require having a formal institution and have few strings attached), most of its activities are not financially supported by any outside donor. It receives smaller donations from its supporters and it also makes use of meeting places provided for free or for below-market price. The decision not to seek a legally recognized framework for the group's activities was made early in 2009 to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic tasks, and possible control by outside influences through administrative burdens, regulations and donors' preferences.<sup>12</sup> Still, referring to AVM as an "*informal* activist group" would be misleading, as all of its activities are structured along an elaborate system of rules and procedures. The main elements of AVM's internal organization are the following.

*AVM is organized into working groups.* As of 2017, there are three main working groups. The working group on "advocacy" deals with issues related to shelters, lack of legal address, public space and criminalization. The working group on "housing" addresses broader issues of housing policy, tries to prevent and obstruct evictions, engages in local community organizing, and organizes the Annual March on the Right to Housing. The "Homeless Women for Each Other" is a group exclusively for women, and most of its activities concern problems specific to homeless women and the struggle against the human rights abuses committed by the child protection authorities whereby children are separated from their parents because of the poverty or homelessness of the

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<sup>10</sup> In 2013, NGOs and churches operated 50-70 percent of the capacities of temporary hostels, overnight shelters and daytime centres (Győri 2014).

<sup>11</sup> The aforementioned street newspaper, *Fedél Nélkül* is a partial exception: while the newspaper is edited, and its distribution is coordinated by social workers, it publishes the articles, short novels, poems and visual art pieces of homeless people, who are also involved in the supervision of its distribution.

<sup>12</sup> On the dilemmas of nonprofit incorporation among movements of homeless people in the US, see Cress 1997.



family.<sup>13</sup> Beside these three main working groups, there is also a group for internal matters (which is also in charge of organizing public cultural programs), and one on the group's legal aid program (which grew into a separate association, as it will be discussed below).

Every working group holds their weekly meetings at a particular, fixed time of the week,<sup>14</sup> where they make operative decisions and plan activities. Important issues are decided by the "large group", the weekly joint organizing meeting for all members, where working groups also report back about their activities. Each working group (as well as the joint organizing meeting) has a coordinator, who is nominated and decided upon by the members, usually for half a year.

*AVM holds semi-annual (three- or four-day long) strategic retreats*, in order to have time to reflect on, and evaluate the group's work, refine and revise its strategy and to discuss in detail everything which concern not the everyday tasks, but the overall goals and orientations of the group. Retreats are also important because they usually provide the best opportunities for members to spend time together, and to play games, watch movies or have lengthy conversations with each other (for homeless members, it is also often the only time they can get away from the city as some sort of a vacation). Positions which are filled on the basis of nominations (but without voting) are also filled or renewed in these retreats: the two coordinators of membership (who are expected to pay most attention to the involvement and retainment of members), coordinators for financial matters, for the press, for international relations, and members of the working group on internal matters.

*Every group meeting is facilitated*, and trainings on facilitation are regularly held to allow each member to acquire the necessary skills to facilitate a discussion. Participants can speak only after raising their hand and being asked to speak by the facilitator. The use of activist hand-signs (for expressing agreement and disagreement while someone speaks and which were publicized recently e.g. by the "Occupy" protesters) were discussed in the group and decided against, as it might intimidate shy speakers, discourage the formulation of alternative opinions against a perceived majoritarian standpoint, and facilitate impatience. Meetings are run on the basis of a pre-prepared detailed agenda which is also shared on the group's listserv prior to the meeting. In order to keep track of decisions and responsibilities, minutes are also prepared for every meeting, which are then distributed in hard copies among the participants of the subsequent meeting.

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<sup>13</sup> On this issue, see the Committee on the Rights of the Child's (2014) most recent report of Hungary.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the date of the main organizing meeting (the "large group") essentially did not change since 2009: it is always on Monday evening (with the exception of Christmas or New Years Eve, but regardless of any other holiday).

*In AVM, every decision is made by a consensus.* Voting is prohibited, and indeed considered to be a taboo, though the decision making process still utilizes a majoritarian logic in a soft way and within constraints. In the group's practice, consensus decision making does not mean that every single member needs to agree that the decision in question is the best from the available options. What it means however is that each member has a "veto-power" over every decision. So if after a discussion there seems to be an option behind which most of the voiced opinions converge (the length of the discussion being determined by the extent to which the issue in question is contested), the disagreeing members are at one point asked, whether the discernible majoritarian decision would be *acceptable* for them. If not, the group proceeds with the debate; if yes, the decision has been made. In order to ensure the participation of homeless members in the decision making process, every important question needs to be decided *in person*, and not on the group's listserv (which homeless members usually have less frequent and less regular access to).

While some of these rules might seem to be self-explanatory in the provided form, a challenging aspect of integrating new members into the group is the process of facilitating their "socialization" into the day-to-day application of these rules: e.g. not to speak without being asked by the facilitator, not to speak about topics other than those on the agenda, etc. Indeed, one of the most delicate tasks of the facilitator is to strike a right balance between applying these rules strictly enough to ensure the orderly and timely course of the meeting but without applying them too rigidly and thereby discouraging members from voicing their opinions.

The aforementioned rules also serve to encourage a certain self-reflective approach to the group's work. An interesting example of this is how the problem of homeless members' asking for money from "ally" members was handled. Initially, this led to a lot of tensions (to a significant degree because those homeless members who were in equally bad financial condition but did not ask for help felt resentment over those who did, and because asking for "loans" and not being able to pay it back might have contributed to some members' absence from meetings). When the problem was perceived, a group of members was assembled into a committee to think of solutions for the problem in order to prevent the prevalence of informal, individual donations (which are likely to lead to such inegalitarian dynamics that are corrosive to the inner life of the group) while at the same time providing for some channels for the financial support for those in dire need. The initial suggestion which the committee had prepared was not accepted, so they were asked to revise it. A refined suggestion was then delivered, which was implemented. According to these rules, each member can ask for donations in the large organizing meeting (requests can be anonymous or with a name, they can specify the purpose, such as "medication", "shelter fee", but this is not required); then everyone is invited to contribute, but those who receive do not know the identity of the givers. Members who received a donation are encouraged (at least in theory) to give the donation back – in

which case it is not returned to each member who contributed, but to the group as a whole.

### **2.3. AVM's main activities**

AVM engages in a broader variety of activities than what is usual for most organizations or activist groups, including organizing marches and protests; negotiating with various state authorities and services (e.g. the local authorities' property management companies, the police, the emergency medical service, shelters); defending tenants and shack-dwellers against evictions with non-violent resistance, holding teach-ins in homeless shelters on various legal issues (such as voting rights or discriminatory law enforcement); formulating detailed policy proposals; squatting empty buildings;<sup>15</sup> organizing cultural and educational programs for homeless people; renovating vacant public housing units and lobbying the local authority to rent them out to people living in homelessness; organizing ophthalmological exams and providing donated glasses for homeless people for free; conducting participatory action research projects (see Udvarhelyi 2013a); promoting legal change through strategic litigation and providing free legal aid in individual cases, etc.



**Figure 2: Activists of AVM defend a family from eviction (2014)**  
Source: AVM. Photo by Anna Vörös. The banner on the left reads: "Housing is a human right".

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<sup>15</sup> For a recent comparative study on AVM's approach to squatting, see Gagyi 2016.

An indicative list of AVM's main activities is presented in the following table:

<b>The "Housing" working group</b>	
The mobilization of people living in housing poverty	Monthly mutual aid meetings
	Local community organizing
Housing policy	Formulating housing policy demands
	Annual March for the Right to Housing
Evictions	Weekly duty on evictions
	Individual-level advocacy ("case-work")
	Civil disobedience actions (human blockades) against evictions
	Detailed information booklet on the process of evictions
Public housing	Collection and publication of data on the public housing stock
Vacant (public) housing units	Participatory vacant unit counts
	Symbolic squats/takeovers of vacant buildings
<b>The "Advocacy" working group</b>	
Legal address	Provision of information and advice about related legal problems
	Monthly mutual aid meetings
	Data collection on the prevalence of lack of (regular) legal address
	Formulation of policy proposals
Homeless-assistance system	Individual-level advocacy ("case-work")
	Policy advocacy
	Campaigns and protests
Public restrooms	Policy advocacy
	Awareness raising
Self-built shacks	Organizing people living in self-built shacks
	Protecting self-built shacks from demolition
Criminalization of homelessness	Campaigning for the abolition of the criminalization of homelessness
	Data collection on misdemeanor charges against homeless people
Police harassment and discriminatory law enforcement	Campaigning to end discriminatory law enforcement
	Participatory action research
	Awareness raising
<b>The "Homeless Women for Each Other" working group</b>	
Oppression of women	Organizing workshops for the empowerment of homeless women
	Providing a space exclusively for women and thereby facilitating the sharing of experiences of discrimination and domestic abuse
Problems specific to homeless women	Collection and distribution of information

Temporary homes for families	Collection of grievances from families residing in temporary homes
	Individual-level advocacy ("case-work")
Abusive practices by the child protection authorities	Individual-level advocacy ("case-work")
	Campaigning against the breaking up of homeless families

**Table 1: Activities of AVM’s three main working groups**

*The grey colouring signals that the group is not currently (as of 2017) engaged in the activity.*

Certain important activities that grew out of AVM’s work in the past years have been “out-sourced” to formal organizations which function as close affiliates of the group. The legal project of the group—which consists of a weekly legal clinic at one of the busy public spaces of Budapest and the provision of free legal aid to people living in housing poverty—has grown into a separate, formal organization in 2016 (the *Street Lawyer Association*), which opened up the future possibility of professionalization and the employment of full-time staff in order to reach and serve more people.

An other affiliate formal organization of AVM is the *From Street to Housing Association*, which grew out of a local struggle of AVM against the demolition of self-built shacks in 2012. AVM managed to stop the forced evictions and to convince the local authority to provide vacant, dilapidated public housing units which the group can renovate (through donations and volunteer work) and can house some of the shack-dwellers. Beside adapting this model at other localities, the association implements further innovative local projects as well, in order to provide affordable housing for formerly homeless people.

Finally, *The School of Public Life Foundation*, a community-based training, research and development center in Budapest is also a close affiliate of AVM, which grew out of the group’s educational and training projects. Founded in 2014 by two “ally” members of AVM, its goal is to “make accessible the trainings and resources necessary for efficient advocacy and movement-building for a much broader audience of oppressed and excluded citizens and for the organizations representing them”.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. An experiment in inter-class cooperation**

The mobilization and empowerment of those most directly affected by homelessness and housing poverty is the prime goal of AVM and is valued for both its instrumental and inherent value. According to the understanding of politics cultivated within the group, the involvement of people living in housing

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kozeletiskolaja.hu/page/rolunk>

poverty is crucial for genuine social change to occur with respect to housing, while the involvement and politicization of homeless people is also a powerful negation of the dominant prejudices against homeless people and their social and political exclusion.

Prior literature on organizations and movements of homeless people often emphasized the difficulties of organizing by homeless people due to their extreme deprivation. It has been argued, for example, that the marginalization of the homeless “translates to a precarious and sometimes limited form of grassroots activism” (Williams 2005, 497) or that the “image of organized, enduring associations of leaders and followers pursuing deliberately chosen strategies in opposition to others [...] does not apply to the organisations of homeless people” (Anker 2009, 281). A study of a Danish user organization for homeless people (SAND) explicitly argued that “interest organisations of marginalized groups need support from external actors (state or others) to survive because of their structural weaknesses, limited resources and transience” (Ibid, 275), and researchers on homeless social movement organizations in the US also emphasized “the importance of external support for homeless activism” (Cress and Snow 1998: 1102).

The transitional nature of homelessness has been also pointed out as a barrier to organizing homeless people (Allen 2009; Anker 2009). While AVM has also lost members due to the amelioration of their situation (especially if they could secure a job or housing only in the countryside or by emigrating to Western Europe), for many of its members (and for many of the homeless people in general), homelessness has not been transitional, but an unacceptably long-term condition. Moreover, because AVM understands homelessness and its corresponding constituency in a broad sense to include those without adequate housing (and the transition from homelessness to inadequate housing is most often the only realistic possibility for most), and explicitly values the experience of *formerly* homeless people as well, a member’s escape from homelessness does not necessarily need to pose a problem for his or her continuing participation in the group’s work.

Furthermore, the group’s experiences suggest that among those living in housing poverty, it is not the most deprived who are the hardest to organize. At least in the case of AVM—where participation usually requires a fair amount of presence—it has been easier to recruit and keep members who are strictly speaking homeless, because they have been more likely to be single, in comparison to those who live in inadequate or precarious housing, who have been more likely to live with their families. While for the former, the collectivity (which members of AVM sometimes refer to as their family), and the sense of belonging and the human relations which accompany it are often otherwise scarce resources, the latter are more likely to find that every time they attend an organizing meeting is a time they could have spent with their families.

The problematic of homeless people’s resource poverty and their corresponding need for external support also plays out differently in the case of AVM, in which

activists with direct experience of homelessness and housing poverty work together with “ally” members, i.e. with activists without such experiences (and more resources). This decreases the group’s need for *external* support: AVM can be said to be not dependent on that (though it does rely on meeting spaces that are provided for it for free or for below-market prices). It is worth noting that since homeless people, in the narrow sense of the term, are often deprived of personal relationships with non-homeless people (Albert and Dávid, 2001), especially as far as egalitarian relationships are concerned (thus excluding contacts with bosses, welfare administrators or shelter staff), the very interactions that the diverse class composition of AVM make possible and facilitate can be considered as “resource” for many of the group’s members.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the presence of non-homeless activists in the group is likely to bring many of the problematic dynamics inherent in external support (of control or domination) inside the group.

However, it would be misleading to simplify the internal dynamics of the group into the cooperation of members who are, and who are not, directly affected by homelessness or housing poverty – even if this is how the group usually presents itself to the public. Essentially all of the long term “ally” members joined the group after having had more or less experience with advocacy or activism, and most of the “ally” members also come from a broadly understood social science (cultural anthropology, sociology, social policy, gender studies, social work) background. It is also telling (even if it is partially explained most probably by sociometric factors) that around half of all the “ally” members had studied (and lived) at some point at the *College for Advanced Studies in Social Theory*, a small university organization, dedicated to the study of critical social theory. It would be therefore more accurate to describe the group not as the joint effort of homeless and non-homeless activists, but as an alliance of homeless people and radical intellectuals (or students).

The prevalence of activists with some sort of social scientific background should not be seen as an accident, but is perhaps best understood in relation to the inherently political nature of sociological knowledge (which will be explored in more detail in the following section). The social science background of “ally” members probably also contributes to a self-reflective approach that allows for the recognition and questioning of their (our) own privileges, and can also add to the sense of support on part of homeless members (who can feel that they get the best possible allies, who are educated and “on par” with the kind of opponents the group needs to face).

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<sup>17</sup> These relationships can also function as springboards for other non-homeless communities (e.g. activist communities not otherwise related to housing issues or homelessness), and relationships with non-homeless people (including those who are not AVM’s activists but follow the group’s work) can also facilitate access to resources in a more material sense (e.g. one-off or more long-term employment possibilities).

The dialectic and mutual advantages of the cooperation, and complementary knowledge of “ally” members (with their social scientific background) and members with direct experience with homelessness can be best illustrated by AVM’s social policy demands. An earlier attempt at organizing homeless people led to the 1997 foundation of *Homeless for the Homeless Cultural and Advocacy Association*, which drafted a petition in 2002. The petition almost exclusively addressed grievances about the regulations of, and conditions in shelters.<sup>18</sup> Reminiscent of Lenin’s classical characterization of the type of political struggle of the dominated which strives to “secure from the government measures for alleviating distress to which their condition gives rise, but which do not abolish that condition” (Lenin [1901] 1969, 43), they demanded better treatment *as homeless*, without going very far at problematizing or politicizing their homelessness. Back in 2009, the notion of asking for “abandoned Soviet barracks” to shelter homeless people was also just as popular among the homeless members of AVM as it was among the general public.

The fact that the group has been nonetheless arguing for social and housing policy measures that address the root causes of homelessness instead, is certainly contributable to a significant extent to the “ally” members. On the other hand, that AVM’s demands do not remain at a high level of abstraction either, and that the group has remained also very attentive to, and active in such questions as whether homeless people can use the services of more than one daytime centers (which is often necessary if they want to eat, as well as wash and handle administrative issues, etc.), whether homeless people can access their belongings they left at the storage run by a homeless-assistance organization on the weekends, or the availability of public rest rooms, is thanks to the group’s articulation of the homeless members’ most immediate daily grievances.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Udvarhelyi 2014b, 187. For the English doctoral dissertation in which the book is based, see Udvarhelyi 2013.





**Figure 3: Homeless members of AVM at a protest (2013)**

Source: AVM. Photo by Dina Balogh. The placard reads "We don't want to live in mass shelters!"

Contrary to Lenin's influential assertion that class political consciousness can be brought to movements of the dominated "only from without", AVM's method for inter-class cooperation is not that of external inculcation of critical ideologies, but that of mutual learning. The ethos of AVM's inner organization could be described through the Gramscian premise that all humans are intellectuals. The role of "ally" members—who, because of their class position and education, have had privileged access to knowledge—is to facilitate their less privileged fellow activists' taking on "directive and organizational, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual" functions (Gramsci 2000, 310), and also to learn from their experience and insights in a "passage from knowing to understanding and to feeling and vice versa from feeling to understanding and to knowing" (Ibid. 349).

However, the fact that activists who are living in homelessness or dire housing poverty are working together with a subset of the non-homeless population who are much beyond the average in terms of various types of cultural capital (degrees, organizational skills and experience, social theory and social policy knowledge, etc.) also bears the danger of becoming disempowering by intensifying the problems—power inequalities and symbolic domination—the possibilities of which are inherent in any political collectivity in which activists from different class position work together.

For example, an unintended consequence of how AVM's members customarily refer to each other as being either an "affected" (a shorthand for "member affected by homelessness or housing poverty) or an "ally" member (understood as members who are not homeless) is that it might give the false impression that the former do not possess certain skills (e.g. organizational skills or the ability to find, read, and comprehend data or literature on various social policy issues) the latter do because of their homelessness, while those skills would neither be possessed by the vast majority of non-homeless (and even middle class, university educated) Hungarians.

The organization culture of AVM facilitates an understanding of educational (and class) differences in which questions of merit is entirely absent—to paraphrase Bourdieu, an understanding that "culture is not what one is but what one has" (Bourdieu 1993a, 234)—and cultural capital is understood as a collective resource to be used for the shared goals of the collectivity. AVM's organizational culture also facilitates an intense reflection on the egalitarianism of the internal organization and operation a work. The kind of meticulously detailed procedural rules described above should not be seen only as a functional necessity given the quantity and complexity of the group's work, but as also being driven by the awareness of what Jo Freeman (1972) called *the tyranny of structurelessness*. As she argued in her influential essay, an informal structure of power is likely to coexist with a formal dedication to "structurelessness", which can therefore be a "way of masking power" and can hinder truly democratic decision making, egalitarian and inclusive participation, and accountability.

There are also several organizational rules which meant specifically to ensure that "ally" members do not dominate homeless members, and in general to counteract the spontaneous reproduction of power inequalities. First, in principle no "ally" member is allowed to represent the group by herself or himself; public appearances are decided on by a system of nominations, and at least 50 percent of the representatives need to be women (which is however handled with some flexibility to accommodate constraints of availability). As this rule applies for most media representations as well, AVM attempts to provide intensive preparation for media appearances to its members.

Second, there is also a "special facilitating" system to enhance equality of participation in the discussions: in this case, the consecutive order of the signals is modified by the facilitator in order to compensate for the usual biases of participation (homeless members are given priority over "ally" members, women over men, new members over old members etc.). This was initially used only on rare occasions, but the group is currently experimenting with its universal application.

Third, while the group is essentially open to prospective homeless members and people living in housing poverty (after attending three meetings, they are asked whether they would like to become members, without any membership fee), it cannot be automatically joined by "allies", only by invitation. Given that it is

usually easier to mobilize middle-class activists, this is intended to serve that a right balance is kept in the ratio of “ally” members and members directly affected by homelessness or housing poverty: i.e. to ensure that enough additional organizational skills and resources are present without overburdening the “ally” members, but also without non-homeless activists dominating the group. If it is perceived that the group would require further work force, members collectively decide on the invitation of specific “ally” activists who have been nominated by someone.

Fourth, homeless members are provided with financial support from the group for travelling (public transportation is expensive, and to get into the centre of the city and back to the shelters or to the self-built shacks of members can take several tickets), and if they coordinate a campaign, a task or a working group, they also receive support for mobile phone and internet use expenses.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the group regularly organizes a variety of trainings, workshops and teach-ins (ranging from facilitation and note-taking, through public speaking skills, to feminism, social policy and social theory) in order to make every member of the group increasingly capable of, and confident to take on an increasing variety of tasks.

All these organizational rules notwithstanding, the participation of “ally” members cannot cease to risk being dominating. Perhaps the most invincible aspect of the inherently problematic nature of “ally” members’ involvement concerns linguistic and symbolic domination. After Bourdieu, I refer to linguistic domination whereby a particular use of language, associated to certain class positions, is imposed as legitimate on all speakers, which make speaking a classifying act. Therefore, speaking becomes the appropriation of “one or other of the expressive styles already constituted in and through usage and objectively marked by their position in a hierarchy of styles which expresses the hierarchy of corresponding social groups” (Bourdieu 1991, 55). Consequently, every linguistic exchange “contains the *potentiality* of an act of power, and all the more so when it involves agents who occupy asymmetric positions in the distribution of the relevant capital” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 145).

The heightened attentiveness to fellow activists and the self-restraint to not dominate discussions, which are expected of “ally” members, are not in themselves able to neutralize this aspect of domination. This is a form of symbolic domination, the occurrence of which is not conditional on the speaker’s intentions, but presupposes “on the part of those who submit to it, a form of complicity”, the recognition of the objective order of uses of language, based on “dispositions which, although they are unquestionably the product of social determinisms, are also constituted outside the spheres of consciousness and constraint” (Bourdieu 1991, 50-51).

Beside the aforementioned system of “special facilitation”, in AVM there is also a strict policy prohibiting the unnecessary use of foreign expressions. However, such egalitarian rules can obviously address only the most superficial aspects of linguistic domination. There is no organizational rule which can neutralize how

the internalized normative standard against which speaking is perceived as “nice”, “clever”, “convincing” or “well-argued” is biased in favor of intellectuals and against less educated members.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while efforts are made to limit the symbolic violence inherent in intra-group linguistic exchanges (the most paradoxical manifestation of which was perhaps the occasion when the author of the current text was holding a teach-in on Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic domination to convince the homeless participants why his way of speaking should not be perceived as “convincing”), and the increase in self-confidence homeless members usually gain through participating in the group’s work might be able to counteract partially this dominating aspect of the inter-class alliance AVM is based on – still, this problematic aspect of the internal dynamic of the group might be impossible to fully eliminate.

## **4. The politics of citizenship and needs interpretation**

### **4.1. The politics of homelessness**

In order to spell out the politics of AVM, we need to turn first to the dominant social understanding of homelessness and the dominant image of “the homeless”. In Hungary, the dominant state response to homelessness, the homeless-assistance system, is best explained “as an attempt to neutralize the outrage homelessness produces in those who see it, and not as a reasoned desire to cope with it as a particular social problem” (Marcuse 1988, 83). It leaves the structural causes of homelessness unaddressed, and even though it recognizes homeless people’s need for “help” – but not their need for justice.

The homeless-assistance system that has emerged since 1990 did alleviate the suffering—and even saved the lives—of countless homeless citizens, but at a significant cost concerning the social construction of homelessness. For shelters not only deliver services, they also perpetuate an understanding of homelessness. As Hoch and Slayton notes about the case of the US, efforts to provide at least emergency shelters for the homeless were “not only rapidly expanding the number of these dormitories for the poor”, they have been also “legitimizing their institutional value as a solution to the problem of homelessness” (Hoch and Slayton 1989, 5). In the early 1990s, the victories of the homeless protesters and their social professional allies were won at the cost of the perpetuation of a misrepresentation of the problem of homelessness and the misrecognition of its causes and its possible solutions. With the separation that emerged between the question of homelessness and housing policy, homeless citizens became reduced to the status of *bare life*, who “in their naked humanity, are at best to be kept alive” (Feldman 2004, 25) through shelters and street social work – an understanding which was even enshrined in a 2000 decision by the Constitutional Court which ruled that the state is only obliged to

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wright’s account on the cooperation of homeless activists and students in California, and their different experiences with respect to being listened to (Wright 1997, 277-278).

provide shelter “to offer protection from a danger directly threatening human life”.<sup>20</sup>

The very idea that shelters are the obvious alternatives to rough sleeping implies that “homeless people are not fit for regular housing” and thus reinforces “prevailing popular ideas that homeless people are of a different, inferior kind – ‘not like us’” (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin 2007, 79). This contributes to the emotional (and spatial) distancing of homeless people, while the discourse emphasizing the individual responsibilities and deficiencies of homeless people—a kind of “sick-talk” (Gowan, 2010) which shelters often impose on their residents (Lyon-Callo 2004; Ámon, 2013)—is silent about the systematic causes of homelessness.

The symbolic cost of the emergence of an extensive homeless-assistance system has been the reification of the couple notions of *homeless and shelter*, similar to the self-explanatory relationship we understand to be between such notions as *soldier and barrack*, *sick and hospital*, or *criminal and prison*. The cost to be paid is that now upon seeing a homeless person we do not ask the question “Why does not (s)he have a place to live?” but rather another one: “Why does not (s)he go in the shelters?” And this question is not only about curiosity, but also about blame.

Social provision, instead of enriching citizenship as envisioned by T. H. Marshall (1964), might end up eroding it (cf. Fraser and Gordon 1992) through the reproduction of a reified notion of “the homeless” and an asociological and apolitical understanding of homelessness as a social problem. Nancy Fraser wrote that “public assistance programs ‘target’ the poor, not only for aid but for hostility” (Fraser 1997, 25), and the same could be discerned about the homeless assistance system, the *par excellence* example of social policies that address only—at the surface—the consequences of social injustices while leaving its underlying structural causes intact. It is not able to solve homelessness but it is able to provide an apparent solution and therefore to relocate the blame about homelessness from the state (and the political ruling class) to the homeless themselves.

This is why the apparent availability of shelters has played such an important role in the attempted justification of punitive measures against homeless people. The right-wing mayor of Budapest explained this quite clearly in a television interview: “as a first and second step, we lend a helping hand, with the appropriate provisions. But if someone nonetheless still tries to continue his [homeless] lifestyle, almost in a truculent way, fundamentally threatening the interests of the vast majority, he turns himself an outlaw, and thereby needs to

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<sup>20</sup> 42/2000 (XI. 8.) Constitutional Court decision. For a conservative critique of the post-1990 constitutional case law in Hungary which nonetheless emphasizes the Constitutional Court’s unwillingness to protect the poorest segments of the citizenry, see Sajó 2006.

be treated as such, and be taken away”.<sup>21</sup> Just as Foucault wrote about the moral split in poverty which accompanied the emergence of poorhouses in the classical age:

On the one side was the realm of Good, where poverty submitted and conformed to the order that was imposed upon it, and on the other the realm of Evil, where poverty rebelled and tried to escape that order. *The former accepted internment, and found its repose there; the latter resisted it, and thereby merited its condition.* (Foucault 2006, 59; emphasis added)

This leads us to the other—and increasingly—dominant approach on homelessness: “sin-talk” (Gowan 2010), which manifests itself mostly in the attempts to legitimize its criminalization. As it was argued in the first section of the article, criminalization has been recently codified in Hungary, but it is not aggressively enforced: still the discourse that aims to legitimize the criminalization of homelessness has done at least as much long-term harm by blaming, stigmatizing and dehumanizing homeless people and by redefining homelessness as an issue of aesthetics and order as criminalizing itself through the harassment and fining (and possible incarceration) of the homeless.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Budapest Mayor István Tarlós on TV2, 5<sup>th</sup> of November, 2010. Source (in Hungarian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uotpv1BbaQ8>



**Figure 4: Civil disobedience at the Budapest City Council against the criminalization of homelessness (2013)**

Source: AVM. Photo by Gabriella Csoszó. The banner reads: “Housing, not jails!”

The criminalization of homelessness and the exclusion of homeless people from public spaces would hide one of the direst and most obvious consequences of flawed government policies and an unjust social system. This could be seen as a veil of ignorance, but one that is the reverse of the concept developed by political philosopher John Rawls (1971). “Rather than imagining that we do not know our individual characteristics and life situation in order to develop principles of justice, this veil of ignorance ensures that we make political decisions without ever having to think about how they might affect differently situated persons” (Kohn 2004, 140). But what is more important here is not how the criminalization of homelessness aims to make the visible signs of homelessness *disappear*, but how the related discourse makes homeless people *appear*.

As Hungarian cultural anthropologists Török and Udvarhelyi (2005) argue with regard to the (anti-homeless) “underpass-cleaning rites” of the Hungarian authorities: in the rhetoric that attempts to legitimize the spatial exclusion of homeless people, the notions of “public” and “society” become restricted along with the scope of legitimate users of public spaces, and homeless people become

also excluded from these—ideally universal—categories. Rough sleeping is often framed as an issue which inconveniences the “citizens” of a city (as if homeless people were not also citizens), or simply “the city” (as if homeless people were not also “residents” of the city).

This is the semantics of asymmetrical counter-concepts as elaborated by Reinhart Koselleck (1985): the collective self-definition of the speaker is such that it excludes the other from the possibility of recognition. Thereby, homelessness becomes a problem that occurs not within the public but a “threat that appears from elsewhere” (Kawash 1998, 330–1). This is revealingly exemplified by a headline of one of the most read Hungarian news portals after the Constitutional Court decision that overturned the criminalization of homelessness, “The mayor fears a homeless *invasion*”, or by an introductory note of a newsreader in a television program: “Will rough sleepers *invade* underpasses for good?”.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, a systemic approach to homelessness, or “system-talk” (Gowan, 2010), would locate the sources of homelessness in the social structure and in the dominant system of distribution and redistribution. While this approach does absolve homeless people from the blame for their homelessness, it is often accompanied with a lack of agency concerning the homeless themselves (cf. Wagner 1997). After all, if it is all about the social structure, it is easy to see homeless people as helpless victims of injustices.

#### **4.2. The politics of citizenship**

The politics of AVM can be understood as being inspired by a systemic approach to homelessness, with the important qualification that homeless people are entrusted with agency, and not only as *prospective residents*, but as *actual citizens*, i.e. as agents of social change. The group articulates—and its activists who are homeless or live in housing poverty embodies—an image of homelessness which is opposed to both the blaming of homeless people and the individualizing and depoliticizing of homelessness (characteristic of “sin-talk” and “sick-talk”, respectively), while at the same time avoids (re)presenting those without housing as hopeless victims – which is not only of strategic value.

For the aforementioned reasons, homeless people suffer not only from exclusion from the housing (and labor) market, but also from a specific type of disempowering *symbolic exclusion*, something that is felt deeply in a process through which social structures and the power relations inherent in them become internalized. One of the most disturbing and most specific contribution

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<sup>22</sup> (Emphasis added.) Right wing politicians as well as journalists argued after the decriminalization of homelessness that there would be a great increase in rough sleeping in busy underpasses, and more homeless people would die of hypothermia because of the Constitutional Court decision.



of Bourdieu's later work to our understanding of domination is how it becomes embodied in the form of enduring dispositions: through the “somatization” of social hierarchies which is “tantamount to a durable construction of the unconscious” (Bourdieu 1996, 198). Liberation—he argued—would thus require the radical transformation not only of “the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant” (Bourdieu 2001, 43), and not only of “consciousness”, but also of the already existing dispositions by means of a “thoroughgoing process of countertraining, involving repeated exercises” (Bourdieu 2000, 172) that would only be capable of durably transform habitus.

It is worth returning to aforementioned inherent politics of sociological knowledge which “ally” members play an important role in bringing into the work of AVM. First, sociological imagination is capable of suspending the suspension of doubt “as to the possibility that the social world could be other than it is” (Bourdieu 2000, 1972), and therefore of limiting the legitimacy of any arbitrary social order that stems from its ability to make itself appear as natural. Sociology can “de-naturalize” and “defatalize” (Bourdieu 1993, 26) the social order – for example the state’s abandonment of its responsibilities for those living in severe housing poverty which emerged as an almost self-evident feature of the post-transition policy regime. By allowing agents “to think about society as opposed to being thought by it” (Wacquant 2004, 101), social science can be capable of making the social world accessible to speech, and thus to politics. When the sight of people living in the street is widely perceived as being as natural as the change of seasons, this is an important skill.

Second, the dominant understanding of poverty and homelessness is full of ideas that have the function of blaming those at the bottom of the class structure for their fate, and surrounding “the class hierarchy with a moral atmosphere” (Gans 1995, 95). In contrast, class consciousness, the “recognition that our hardship and servitude is mostly independent from our own personal traits” but is “a result of our random position in the social division of labour and in regard to property”—whose emancipatory effect Hungarian philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás compared to the ecstasy of the acquittal from the false accusation known from Franz Kafka’s works—“provides salve for the irrational shame and guilt coming with poverty and subordination, gives a valid knowledge of society and represents moral impetus to liberating collective action” (Tamás 2002, 85-86). But class consciousness understood in this way, is really nothing else than what C. Wright Mills famously called the “sociological imagination” (Mills 2000), or what in turn is the very understanding of homelessness and poverty AVM is cultivating.

What is a matter of recognition and dignity for the dominated is the essence of the sociological imagination: the transformation of private troubles into public issues. From this perspective, the role of “ally” members in the group can be understood as an organic public sociological practice (Burawoy 2004), and the internal politics of AVM as a joint of effort of homeless activists and their “allies” to bring about the “transfer of cultural capital which enables the

dominated to achieve a collective mobilization and subversive action against the established order” (Bourdieu 2000, 188).

Organizing for structural changes also seems to be the most direct means to alleviate the effects of symbolic domination, “this supreme form of dispossession that is the shame of self” (Bourdieu 2004, 619). For as Frances Fox Piven argues, this transformation—dominating domination—is “personal but its also collective. The transformation is personal but it occurs through a change in the collective understanding to which you are exposed” (Shepard 2008, 13). A homeless organizer of an activist group in California defined empowerment “as educating homeless people that they did not ‘cause this situation’ of homelessness” (Williams 2005: 501), just as a sympathetic researcher grasped the value of organizing by Danish homeless people by arguing that it “enables participants to create new understandings of themselves, and to see the problems related to homelessness in a broader social and political perspective” (Anker 2008: 35). Wright, in his study of the Student Homeless Alliance, also emphasized “a greater emotional uplift, a sense of hope” epitomized by such statements of the organization’s homeless participants as “I don’t have to feel ashamed of being a failure because I know the situation was set up so that I fail” (Wright 1997, 291).

Not everyone who finds AVM with a pressing housing problem become an activist and remain with the group. In fact, the most important and most difficult part of group’s recruitment process is the effort to transform the relationship between AVM’s activists and people with housing problems from its initial form, which resembles in many respects the relationship between a “client” and a charitable organization, to that of fellow activists. The mutual aid groups referenced in Table 1 (and which are more recent developments in the work of AVM) grew out of this very attempt, to transform individual-level “case work” into a more collective and more political approach.

In any case, those who are homeless or without secure housing and choose to remain with AVM, are not only exposed to a world view which locates the blame for their poverty and homelessness in the power and distributive inequalities in society, and asserts their moral equality, as citizens, regardless of their material destitution – it also *offers* a channel through which they can step up, “as a full member of society capable of participating on a par with the rest” (Fraser 2000, 103), against those inequalities. It is this reclaiming of citizenship, through being able to take on a role—as homeless, but in opposition to almost everything society is thought her to think of herself as “a homeless”—that is the most immediate gain that homeless people can obtain by participating in such a collective political project for structural change.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Naturally, AVM also provides “ally” members with an opportunity to find or enrich *their* citizenship. As Wright reflected on his own advocate researcher role: “When you talk back to social workers, police, and ‘experts’ on behalf of those who have no voice you also discover your own voice” (Wright 2012, 12). For one of AVM’s founders, Tessza Udvarhelyi’s own personal



**Figure 5: Lakatosné Jutka, a homeless member of AVM speaks at a parliamentary committee (2015)**

Source: AVM. Photo by Zsolt Csízi.

The results of an activity from the 2009 workshops from which AVM emerged provide a telling example of this. Participants were first asked to tell the first expression they associate with the word “homeless”. Most of the expressions they picked were like the following: “hopelessness”, “invisibility”, “a vilified person”, “abandoned”, “fallen”, “nihil”, “hopeless”, “unfortunate”, “bottle of wine”, “exclusion”, “pity”, “dependency”, “vulnerability”, “stinking”, “loneliness” or “bum”. Then they watched together a short video clip in which Joan Harrison, a homeless member of PTH gave a powerful speech at the steps of City Hall in New York City against the announced closure of a drop-in center. In her speech, Harrison emphasized that the institution in question was a place in which the privacy, liberties and dignity of homeless people were violated, but it was nonetheless unacceptable that decision-makers would deprive homeless people even of this meager service. After watching the video clip, participants were asked again to tell the group about the first expression that came to their mind. These were the following: “struggle”, “hope”, “inner firmness”, “union”, “human dignity”, “perseverance”, “anger”, “strength”, “class struggle”, “human rights” and “inspiration”.

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account on how applied cultural anthropology politicized her and how “learning to use that research as part of a social movement, radicalized [her], see Udvarhelyi 2010.

This transformation is very personal, while at the same time is also of broader political significance – for nothing else is as effective in countervailing both the dehumanizing tendencies of public discourse and the patronizing image of the homeless poor cultivated by charity and the homeless assistance system as homeless people reclaiming their status as citizens of equal standing by publicly speaking up against injustice.

### **4.3. The politics of need interpretation**

The parallel to this politics of citizenship reclaiming, and the other main aspect of the politics of AVM is the repoliticization of homelessness, which could be understood along the analysis of Nancy Fraser (1989a) as a “politics of need interpretation”. As we have seen, shelters, the main state response to homelessness, not only provide a roof above one’s head, they also *manufacture meanings* about the appropriate response to homelessness – and also about the *needs* of “the homeless”. In this respect, AVM’s campaigns can be understood as an attempt to “cast off the apparently natural and prepolitical interpretations that enveloped” the needs of those without a home of their own. Of course, what is at stake here—as always in case of the discourse over needs—is a *political* conflict “through which inequalities are symbolically elaborated and challenged” (Fraser 1989b, 162).

As Fraser writes, it can be uncontroversially said that homeless people need shelter in order to live and that the state, as the final guarantor of life has a responsibility to provide for that need. “However, as soon as we descend to a lesser level of generality, needs claims become far more controversial. [...] Do homeless people need forbearance, so that they may sleep undisturbed next to a hot-air vent on a street corner? [...] A bed in a temporary shelter? A permanent home?” (Ibid, 63). AVM demands the latter, and by doing so, it argues not so much for the incremental amelioration of the existing homeless assistance system but—through reinterpreting the status of homeless people (as citizens of equal moral worth) and their needs (housing, instead of shelter from exposure to the natural elements)—puts forward much more ambitious goals.

Goals, which were possible to be formulated in the winter of 1989-1990 (still under the hegemonic influence of the paternalistic welfare dictatorship) but which have been almost completely absent from the public discourse about homelessness after the following two decades. The local experiments of “housing first” (or as the name of AVM’s subsidiary organization dedicated to such programs puts it “From the street to housing”) projects could be also understood not only as a type of direct action to provide homes for a small number of specific homeless individuals, but also as a properly political statement which demonstrates that *it can be done*: that homeless people are not a particular species that somehow can live only in subway stations or shelters, but citizens who have the same *needs* as anyone else, and whose only *differentia specifica* is their—not only material, but also symbolic—exclusion from housing forms considered to be normal.

It would be most probably an overstatement of the influence of AVM to say that it wages a struggle over the (re)distribution of resources, though the egalitarian housing policies it demands would entail just that. (Not that any other advocacy group, besides organized business interest, could have much effect on distributive policies in the post-2010 political system.) But it has been certainly waging a struggle, quite successfully, on the aforementioned two fronts.

For example, while earlier it often took some importuning to make editors and journalists accept that the spokespersons of the group are not those “ally” members who they happen to already know, but the homeless members specifically nominated for that interview, this practice has become largely normalized by now. The power of the group over the public discussion about homelessness and housing is in turn nicely exemplified by the fact that at the 2014 television debate of Budapest mayoral candidates, most of them spoke about the issue of vacant housing (an issue that AVM has been intensively raising awareness of with annual marches as well as symbolic takeovers of vacant buildings).

And while the prospects of any egalitarian reform is indeed very bleak currently in Hungary, it could be argued that none of those struggles that seem lost (in the sense of being ineffective for the material processes of distribution) have been in vain, because—beside providing maybe the only opportunity for those homeless people who join AVM to reclaim their dignity as citizens—they nonetheless contribute to the remaking of the political understanding of homelessness (and “the homeless”) and housing deprivation, and thereby provide for more fruitful conditions for egalitarian social and housing policy reforms, should there be a political opening, than it was the case this past two and a half decades.

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