

## **Debating Homelessness**

### *Actualities and new perspectives in social science research*

Thirty years ago, in 1987, the United Nations proclaimed the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. Since then, homelessness was the object of a significant amount of research. To review these researches, important works have been produced in a cumulative perspective in English (Levinson, 2004) and French (Choppin, Gardella, 2013) speaking language. Such was a necessary step to proceed to the next stage of research on homelessness: Debate. The objective of this congress is to compare and discuss methodological approaches, epistemological perspectives, theories and concepts that are part of this research area. We will also question the aim of homelessness research and the political dimension behind it.

The "debate" would be considered as heuristic: capable of (re) interrogating analyzes and research practices. Researchers will position themselves and share their work in the area of homelessness, while focusing on the boundaries of their own work and building parallels with other fields of research, to open up new perspectives. Investigating homelessness also means taking into account the historical, economic, social and political characteristics that influence its visibility, treatment and understanding in each national context. That is why this dialogue will not be limited to France and the French-speaking countries. On the contrary, this international congress will be an opportunity to expand exchanges to other countries and continents.

Without pretending to answer all the questions related to homelessness, the congress will focus on three lines of thought.

#### **Survey politics: posture and methodology**

Conducting surveys on homelessness is no trivial matter. The engagement of the researcher can be read throughout the research process and reflects what we call the "survey politics" (Fassin, Bensa, 2008). Ethnography is often presented as the methodological approach which is the most struggling with the question of commitment (Cefai *et al*, 2010). It has already been the subject of controversy, in particular with the position of the investigator, the relation to the field or the purpose of the research. For some, the methodological approach can even become a subject for activism (Hopper, 2003). How and in what forms do researchers engage themselves in their investigations? These questions are not the exclusive to ethnography. We expect proposals to continue debate on this particularly sensitive methodological approach when addressing homelessness.

Far from being homogeneous, homelessness surveys are directly linked to the social, historical and political context. A wide range of surveys is emerging under academic research, critical posture, public expertise and action research. Surveys carried out by researcher centers, associations, journalists or documentary filmmakers can be added to this list. How do we qualify these surveys? What knowledge and representations are produced? The different types of survey and the ways in which social science researchers collaborate and discuss (or not) with others actors in this field will be a focus on this section.

## **Categories: origins, meanings and uses**

During the 1990s, categories have emerged in different countries to point out a phenomenon of “new poverty” visible in urban public space: SDF, homeless, itinerants, moradores de rua, etc. One of the first results on this phenomenon was to capture the genealogy of this categorization (*Sociétés Contemporaines*, 1998; Pichon, 2008). This section aims to investigate these dominant categories through debate on the definition of social problem in which other categories exist or have existed. How did these categories emerge? Who created them? How are they controversial? In what spaces, purposes and meanings are they used? What effects do they have in the public debate?

Social science researchers also produced categories particularly to reject certain classification and to propose a more pertinent definition of the subject. Are they the product of an investigation or are they necessary to begin an investigation? The categories are pluralistic and omnipresent: used by the institutions, by those categorized and by assistance professionals. They also make it possible to designate the phenomenon and to distinguish it from other situations. What is the place of these different denominations in our work and how do we position ourselves regarding them? We can also question how these (scientific or "native") categories allow (or not) the objective transformations of the social problem, such as the increasing reliance of families, women and migrants on shelter in France (Yaouancq et al., 2013).

## **Answers: homelessness and social sciences**

While studies on the practices and conditions of life of homeless people, have not decreased, it is clear that more and more research focuses on questioning the different answers addressed to the problem(s) of homelessness. Based on this observation, we expect proposals that question the different types of public action - medical, social, judicial / criminal, police, etc. - from their definitions and conceptions to their implementation in the field. What forms do they take? Which actors are involved in their implementation? The aim is to understand the diversity of answers in a perspective that is both diachronic (what are the evolutions and changes of these actions?) and synchronic (how do several forms coexist in the same period?). The transnational and comparative perspectives will be welcomed here to both view similarities and differences between the countries (De Swaan, 1988; Bruneteaux, Terrolle, 2010; Pichon, Girola, Jouve, 2016).

This section also aims to question the position of the researchers and their investigations in their responses to homelessness: how do they participate in the definition and the implementation of these actions? What are the forms direct or indirect of their participation? Where does the participation take place? More generally, it will be a matter of questioning the formats of publication of social science research, their entry into the public debate and their confrontation with other types of knowledge. The aim is to understand what the social sciences are doing to this public problem.

## **Submission Modalities**

Proposals can be placed on one or more sections of the congress. A short summary of 2000 characters maximum (in French or English) is expected for April 22, 2017. It will be accompanied by a title, the first and last name of the author (s) and their institutional attached. If the proposal is accepted, a long abstract of up to 4 pages should be sent by September 4, 2017.

Proposals must be sent to : [sansabrisme@gmail.com](mailto:sansabrisme@gmail.com)

All the informations are available on the website : <http://sans-abrisme.sciencesconf.org>

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