



HOME - PRAGMATISM AND QUEER THEORY – TWO OPPOSING FORCES?



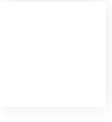
BLOG: PRAGMATISM AND QUEER THEORY – TWO OPPOSING FORCES?

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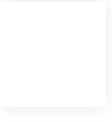


In our last blog, we explored the high levels of homelessness among LGBTQ+ people as – a problem that cannot be easily or neatly solved, that unsettles and discomforts us, and which works to force us to reconceptualise some of our key assumptions. In this blog, we will look more specifically at how we might do this, using and adapting the work of José Muñoz, a Cuban American critical theorist whose approach straddles utopianism and concrete pragmatism,

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz describes queerness itself as ‘the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality’ (p. 1). Queerness allows us to see what is wrong, and so what needs to be changed. It helps us work out what questions we need to ask, of who, and to recognise the assumptions underpinning the ways in which we organise our world.

What does this mean, then, in the context of queer homelessness as a policy and practice area? Firstly, it means we can look to the future – but also gives us that space to dream. This could mean asking questions such as: why do queer people still experience prejudice that leads them to be made homeless? Could we push it further: why does the family unit seem to be vulnerable to prejudice and is there an alternative? Perhaps even further: is our understanding of private home ownership counter to a system where people have secure housing rights? We suggest that using queerness as a tool for emancipatory challenges opens up a *space* to explore these questions further. It helps us to move away from descriptivism, through which status quo policy and practice responses become normative.

The challenge of Muñoz’ queerness, however, is that it does not offer us solutions. It does not lead us from an understanding of *what* is wrong, to recognising *how* to create change. It explicitly does not attempt to break down problems into actionable stages. It lets us feel that ‘[this world is not enough...that something is missing](#)’. It tantalises us with the knowledge of what could be – and even,




perhaps, glimpses of this possibility – but can be criticised for offering no route to get there beyond daydreaming, optimism, and hope. It finds practical form in crucial, illuminating and yet isolated experiences – **queer squats, mutual aid networks, alternative forms of housing** in which **being queer is normalised** – social structures which encircle a specific homeless queer person. The question is how useful this critical analytic is for bringing about the change urgently needed by queer communities. Can we meaningfully improve queer lives through critique, description, and imagination, or do we need practical, solution-driven approaches?

We want to think about homelessness through this lens of queer pragmatism. Muñoz is highly critical of pragmatism which capitulates to heteronormativity and in so doing, becomes self-defeating. Solutions without daring to dream, without existing in the emancipatory space leave the wicked problems of queer homelessness unanswered because they do not unpack the deeper question of how queerness relates to homelessness, how queer experiences of homelessness might be different, nor how a queer lens might undermine our normative understandings of homelessness. But we want to do something different to explore how pragmatism might enable queerness to be recognised and harnessed. We propose that there can be a ‘pragmatic’ approach to LGBTQ+ homelessness, producing an approach which focuses largely upon youth homelessness, which understands LGBTQ+ homelessness as the result of family prejudice and exclusion, and privileges top-down, institutional/third sector solutions. It sidesteps alternative framings, approaches, and solutions available through a queer lens.

To illustrate this, we take the example of LGBTQ+ specific homelessness hostels.

Pragmatically, they address **several urgent issues faced by homeless LGBTQ+ people** – they can offer forms of intensive and targeted help in an efficient way, which can disrupt the cycle of homelessness. They are spaces which have a higher chance of



creating safety from homophobic and transphobic discrimination and prejudice. Pragmatically they also have some drawbacks. They are hard to fund – only a handful exist in the UK, with most directed at those under 25. They are geographically specific – homeless LGBTQ+ people in most areas do not have access to them. Another pragmatic issue is the risk of these spaces being targeted, and so access to them collapsing. For instance, in the *Homelessness Among Trans People in Wales* study, while those spoken to were enthusiastic about LGBTQ+ specific hostels, this was caveated by a concern that they would become easy physical targets for hate crime, and lead to people being outed through their association with the hostel.

From a queer theoretical perspective these spaces can be debated in different ways. It can be argued that they create a utopic, queered space, in which different forms of queer identity become visible and strengthened. Yet they can also, as [Craig Willse](#) has observed, create a narrow and reductive notion of queer homelessness as a single-issue concern, reinforcing the narrative of the young, unsupported, runaway who, with timely intervention, can be effectively set back on the path to re-integration in society.

What you can do:

We want to create a network of people interested in exploring these ideas further. We think that by expanding our ways of thinking about LGBTQ+ homelessness to recognise how it is challenges and expands queer theory, and how queer theory can be used to explain and address LGBTQ+ homelessness, we can develop interventions which genuinely work to reduce the high risk of homelessness among queer people. If you are interested in being part of the network, please get in touch!

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