

Who Are the Wayfarers (And Why Are They Still Here)?

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A Poor, wayfaring man of grief
Hath often cross me on my way,
Who sued so humbly for relief
That I could never answer nay.
I had not pow'r to ask his name,
Where he went, or whence he came;
Yet there was something in his eye
That won my love; I knew not why.

A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief (Montgomery, 1826).

Depictions of homeless people moving into and out of rural and urban spaces have long been a popular conceit in cinema, literature and socio-cultural research (Duncan, 1983; Hardy, 1994; Healy, 2008). In the English-speaking world, for example, this interest has focused explicitly on the American “hobo”, the Australian “swagman” and the British “tramp” (cf. Anderson, 1961; Crane, 1999; Cresswell, 1997; Minehan, 1977; Richardson, 2006). In the popular imagination, “men of the road” are portrayed as part of a downtrodden, degenerate and atomised underclass of itinerants. An alternative, and superficially more expansive and positive interpretation, views such a peripatetic existence in a more genteel, bucolic and romanticised light. Arguably, these overlapping interpretations have given rise to an iconography of “men of the road”, which is too narrow and easily stereotyped. Yet, in spite of this wide body of work and interest, it is difficult to find any direct or detailed reference to wayfaring or wayfarers within the broad purview of the social sciences beyond Cloke *et al's* (2007) singular and significant investigation into the provision of emergency services for homeless people in rural areas.

In this article, I set out to consider the sociological significance of wayfaring in the wider context of the geographical mobility of homeless people. Given the paucity of empirical accounts grounded in thick descriptions (Geertz, 1975), the principal aim of this short

exploratory review is to provide a more developed and nuanced picture of wayfaring. This is its modest, particular focus. The main body of this article is divided into four sections. In the first part, I suggest that beyond a fleeting engagement with the “new nomads” (May, 2000) and the “happy hobo” (Cloke *et al*, 1999) relatively little academic attention has been assigned to wayfarers or wayfaring. Second, I focus on the mobility strategies and environmental knowledge of itinerant homeless people. In this respect, I take inspiration from Paul Higate’s critical engagement with ex-servicemen on the road, and go on to argue that wayfaring is underpinned by a narrative which explicitly articulates the importance of personal autonomy, self-dependency and “freedom on the open road” (2000a, p.331). I then outline a basic typology of wayfaring with particular reference to empirical examples drawn from extensive ethnographic research in rural Dorset. I conclude the discussion by considering the motivations and experiences of men who decide or feel compelled to come off the road.

Background

There has always been a tradition stretching back hundred of years to the early monastic communities of caring for these types of men. Sometimes they would be able to work for a few days in lieu of accommodation. In the Middle Ages they would probably have been cared for by the Almoner and the Infirmarian. However in more recent times we allow them to stay a night in the room. This is in keeping with most religious communities in this country.

(Br. Smyth, 2007)

In the context of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork with homeless people in rural Dorset, I have found myself becoming increasingly fascinated by, and attendant to, the journeys and pauses of wayfarers as they move into and out of rural spaces (Cloke *et al*, 2008). It has become progressively more apparent through “conversations with a propose” (see Burgess, 1984, p.102 for an exegesis) that wayfarers engage with homelessness service providers and statutory agencies in ways that differ considerably to a younger generation of rough sleepers who primarily access night-shelters, hostels and day-centres in major urban locations. This has given rise to the recognition that wayfarers experience a qualitatively different form of “exclusion” from settled society. Here, then, I wish to dissent from Cloke *et al*’s small but otherwise perceptive and persuasive analysis of Hilfield Friary, a Franciscan community set up in 1921 for homeless men travelling about the roads of England in search of work, rather casual and

uncritical acceptance of the assertion that “wayfarers have been made homeless whereas other groups have made themselves homeless” (2007, p.392). Of overwhelming importance in this respect is the extent to which wayfarers speak of their own deep acceptance of their current situation and social status, sometimes blatantly contradicting biographical facts, while simultaneously critiquing accepted social norms and conventional assumptions as to the causes and nature of *their* homelessness.

My principal research site is a voluntary day-centre for rough sleepers in a small market town in Dorset. It was originally conceived to meet the basic physical needs of rough sleepers but also to offer essential advice, information and signposting services. Importantly, the day-centre also recognises that, as a service hub and migratory site, it is deeply entwined in the complex movements of homeless people into and out of rural spaces. In recent times, homeless people and wayfarers have been drawn to the day-centre because of its dynamic connection with the local Category B prison, its proximity to the Pilsdon Community, a “caring community” set deep in the Dorset countryside between the towns of Bridport and Crewkerne which offers respite and refuge to wayfarers, Hilfield Friary and the Dorset coast. This critical milieu can therefore be seen as a crucial nodal point in the wider geographies of homelessness provision. On this point, a longstanding volunteer has observed:

[The town] is a central part of the old trading ways between London down to the West Country, and people expect there to be services here for the homeless. Some people start coming down this way during March and April on their way down to Devon or Cornwall, looking for seasonal cash-in-hands jobs during the summer, then go back to London and the Home Counties.

(O'Donovan, 2008)

Methodology

The methodological standpoint adopted in this study is qualitative and interactive in its approach. It is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork with wayfarers. As such, participant observation is an approach that deliberately avoids some of the structure and control of some of the other research strategies, attempting instead to engage with social life on its own terms. This position of negotiation usually starts out from a situation in which the ethnographer is something of an unknown, a stranger. Indeed, Agar (1980) has defined the ethnographer as a “professional stranger”, by which he means that it is their business not only to encounter that unfamiliarity but to work

towards an eventual understanding of that difference. Participant observation in this respect is important in order to gain access to the “field”, access to relevant key informants and to generate background information for the interview process. This approach is informed by a commitment to the idea that “hanging out” in the field is crucial for the accumulation of “naturally occurring data” (Silverman, 1985).

Ethnographically, I have “encountered” eleven (self-identified or imputed) wayfarers and engaged in face-to-face discussions around two central themes: first, to better understand the socio-cultural reality of “life on the road”; second, the ways in which wayfarers strategically use “outsider” services (see May *et al*, 2005 for an overview) for homeless people and the attendant importance of “local knowledge and homeless circuits” in shaping the choices and constraints associated with “being on the road”. Insights grounded in field experience were developed through a recursive process whereby data from participant observation was recorded as field notes, written in a journal format and continuously expanded, refined or discarded via the process of subsequent field visits, writing and discussion with key informants and gatekeepers (Emmel *et al*, 2007). Once the field had been exited interview material and research commentary was formally transcribed and thematically coded using a combination of manual and computer assisted methods, notably NVivo 8 programme for qualitative data analysis (QSR International, 2008). Data collection was undertaken over a period of thirteen months from May 2007 to July 2008.

I now want to briefly outline what I consider to be the essential difference between “wayfaring” and “rough sleeping”. While I understand “wayfaring” to be a form of homelessness characterised by bouts of prolonged rough sleeping, I want to suggest that as a lived experience it is expressed as a kind of natural liberty defined by opposition to social control as well as the principled avoidance of dominant social welfare institutions. This interpretation does not, however, seek to romanticise wayfaring as a form of unconstrained freedom nor does it seek to elide its privations or potential risks. This is, after all, a community which exists on the symbolic and material margins of society. Rather, what is at issue here is the way in which such meanings and representations are constructed and made visible. Equally, however, we might want to consider what wayfaring and its association with the open road and disengagement with settled society tells us about the question of what it is that people are “socially excluded” from, and what this means for combating homelessness.

In order to develop these and related ideas, I will now turn, albeit briefly, to consider the extant literature of homeless mobility and the few available studies devoted to wayfaring.

Understanding Homeless Mobility

I asked two regulars to write a list of places they had used where they could get free food and place for the night – six months later they sent me a list with over five hundred places on it – mainly religious communities, Salvation Army, Vicarages and Presbyteries and some hostels.

(Fr. Barnett, 2007)

In recent years, a small but growing tributary of thought has begun to theorise the deeper underpinnings of movement among the single homeless population (Higate, 2000b; Cloke et al., 2003; Whiteford, 2008). Within the context of cultural geography, DeVerteuil (2003) has argued that mobility represents the ability of people experiencing homelessness to exercise some measure of autonomy (2003, p.363). The key to making sense of this process is not to see homeless people as merely the passive “consumers” of institutional settings but, rather, as actively engaged in mobility strategies for the purposes of survival. Thus, movement among homeless people is overwhelmingly driven by the desire to improve coping strategies, through the pursuit of paid employment or secure housing, or simply because homeless people are viewed as “out-of-place” in increasingly privatised and regulated urban environments (Sibley, 1995).

The weakness of the extant homeless mobility literature in the UK is revealed most succinctly by its failure to provide a detailed sociological or empirical account of wayfaring. This is at significant odds with the far stronger body of US scholarly work, which has critically explored the related field of hobos and tramps (Anderson, 1961; Symanski, 1979; Donohue, 1996). Within the “life-history” format, Charles Ackerman Berry’s (1978) elegant and evocative “Gentleman of the Road” is an autobiographical account of the hardships and humiliations of being “on the road”. Drawing inspiration from Orwell’s (1933; 1937) social reportage “Gentleman of the Road”, while disregarding the application of distinctly sociological methods and concepts, nonetheless represents an important and insightful account of the experience of urban/rural marginality among a largely ignored class of transient and unsettled men in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More recently, Tobias Jones’s (2006) elegiac “Utopian Dreams” makes reference to the centrality – both historically and contemporaneously – of wayfarers in the everyday life of the Pilsdon

Community. While this example is of much interest, it is largely indirect, partial and atheoretical in its focus.

More helpfully, Paul Higate in his analysis of homeless ex-servicemen provides one of the most important and influential attempts to address why it is that some men “sleep out” and embark on a “life on the road”. Higate shows how gender ideologies interact and intersect with the notion of “freedom” from the military to explain how this particular form of homelessness emerges. All of this points to the way in which a military background influences – and often quite profoundly – how ex-servicemen experience homelessness. This conception leads to the view that a disproportionate “number of ex-servicemen are both disposed to, and equipped for, a life on the road, and may become ‘addicted’ to travel and fleeting fixedness to place” (2000a, p.331). As Higate explains, for homeless ex-servicemen “the road” is experienced as a form of continuity with military life and as such allows for the maintenance of an “autonomous self” (2000a, p.342).

Responding to such insights, I would suggest that Higate’s work can be used practically as a means of understanding wayfaring because it clearly shows that the mobility strategies and environmental knowledge associated with wayfaring is a rational response to limited conditions. Much recent writing has indicated that ex-servicemen consider themselves better equipped, less fearful of sleeping rough and less inclined to seek or accept help from the emergency service network (Johnsen *et al*, 2008). The effect of this is that ex-servicemen tend to invert the perceived “shame” of their situation. It is, as Higate suggests, a lifestyle that is often experienced and expressed positively. Indeed, this is apparent in the following vignettes.

“Robert” having been on the road for fifteen years comments:

I travel the circuit all over England and Ireland. I work my way around on farms in the summer picking strawberries, peas and potatoes and winter [can be spent working] in hotels or kitchens. Moving about you learn about jobs and possible places where you can stay. That’s how it’s been since 93’. Wayfaring is dying out because the traditional sites are closing down. It’s also [increasingly] dangerous to be “on the road” now.

The example of “Steve” is illustrative:

Do I consider myself to be excluded from society? No, I’ve been married, worked hard and had a house. Do I miss it? No, not in the slightest. I enjoy wayfaring and I stay in contact with my daughter. Sure it can be hard, particularly in the winter when it’s cold and wet.

Again and again, my research participants returned to this theme. Thus “Chris” comments:

I have freedom to come and go. Just pick-up that rucksack and walk out. I pity those 9 to 5ers. I worked on building sites all over the country, proper hard graft. But I would rather do my own thing now than to work for a mortgage to a house which is never yours, a new car or a flatscreen TV. What kind of life is that?

Unwilling to submit to authority, Robert, Steve and Chris carve out small areas of autonomy. It reveals some of the ways in which people both adapt to, and resist a homelessness identity, by engaging in identity work that enables them to negotiate the practical, emotional and ontological impacts of insecure housing. This line of thought suggests that homeless people are vigorously engaged in debates about the nature of society that they are expected to fit into. However, I believe that we should approach such assertions with some caution. Rather, and this is a crucial point, we need to fully engage with the diversity of experiences and different responses to being homeless and also to understand that the projection of choice and “freedom” is a rationalised response to personal and social marginalisation. This interpretation would seem to echo Kim Hooper’s (2003) argument that for some, although by no means all people living on the street, the articulation of a “vocabulary of volition” or micro narratives which are sited in opposition to popular imaginings in both the public sphere and academe represent the last refuge of self-respect.

Let us now illustrate these themes by examining the salient characteristics of wayfarers and wayfaring.

Who Are the Wayfarers?

My experience in Dorset was that over half of the 500 wayfarers we had each year would be “regulars”. That is men who were on the road as a way of life, but were often precipitated into by some crisis in their lives, often compounded by alcohol addiction.

(Fr. Barnett, 2007)

Without a doubt, the term “wayfarer” evokes strong religious and melioristic overtones. It plaintively and affectingly recalls the notion that “Christ himself was a person of the road, a wayfarer” (Cloke *et al*, 2007, p.391). In this regard it is not uncommon for wayfarers to travel on the Pilgrims’ Way (Winchester to Canterbury) or on ancient or seasonal route ways that follow the location of monastic communities

(Sancta Maria Abbey, East Lothian to Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, Leicestershire), “cultural scenes” or established “homeless places”. This biblical understanding and “compassionate commitment” has manifested itself along two distinct but overlapping lines. Historically, Benedictine monks and Franciscan brothers have sought to provide vagrant homeless men with a “space of acceptance” in which to address material and spiritual needs. Thus:

We feel that the wayfarers make an important contribution to the ethos of our community and sustain our policy of open hospitality to all comers.

(Fr. Barnett, 2007)

In this way, wayfarers have tended to gravitate towards religious and New Age communities because they are perceived as being less “oppressive” and “chaotic” and insufficiently attractive to a younger, substance-dependant generation of homeless men. Relatedly, and following Jesus’ injunction to “look for me among the poor”, religious communities have actively set out to embrace mobile practices in order to engender spiritual salvation and personal reform among “men of the road”:

Our order began its ministry walking the roads and sleeping in “Doss houses” with them and then trying to rehabilitate them by teaching them a craft.

(Br. Paschal, 2007)

This acknowledgement of the deeply religious character of wayfaring reveals some of the ways in which wayfarers make use of different service providers in different places, and signals the development of a meaningful understanding of the flows and countless “iterations” of this transient group between public and private worlds, “outsider” service providers and interstitial spaces. But we need to go further. In this regard, I now wish to introduce a basic typology of wayfaring based on eight markers or reoccurring motifs.

(1) Wayfarers reject their homeless status not because they are not actually homeless but because they are not part of the traditional “street” homeless population, which service providers (both faith-based and mainstream) are designed to serve. It is claimed that wayfaring is perceived and experienced as a conscious choice. This may reflect the need to maintain a coherent and positive “narrative identity” (McNaughton, 2006).

(2) Wayfarers move from town to town by “jumping” trains, on foot or by hitchhiking. Looked at like this the “wayfarer” is perpetually on the

move, seeking casual employment or simply a place to sleep (Duncan, 1983). It is a journey and lifestyle that is all too frequently spent sleeping rough under a hedge, in a bus shelter or in a church porch. Migratory circuits are often informed by seasonal considerations, and as such will follow established coastal routes or transport hubs. In addition to this, and reflecting the centrality of Christian communities, mobility patterns become intimately connected to religious holidays and observances. Invariably these occasions provide wayfarers with an opportunity to stay and rest for more than a single night or short weekend.

(3) Wayfarers have considerable environmental knowledge upon which to draw in order to find a place to sleep or eat for free. This kind of knowledge is an inevitable consequence of meeting people in daycentres, night-shelters and “outsider” services for homeless people, or, alternatively on the road. At the same time, however, wayfarers can also display a reluctance to share information on the basis that a previously unknown or under-utilised “space of care” (Johnsen *et al*, 2005) will be overrun or “ruined” by others. Here the prevailing view is that “exposure” will lead to conflict, alienation and the obsolescence of once sympathetic communities or individuals willing to offer temporary refuge and respite.

(4) Many, though not all, wayfarers actively “on the circuit” have an older age profile than the non-statutory homeless population. My research with wayfarers would seem to suggest that pathways into homelessness are similar to those commonly reported by other homeless people (Ravenhill, 2008). But within this group there will also be a disproportionate number of ex-servicemen with direct experience of the old “spikes”, relics of the poor law workhouses (Hall, 2005).

(5) Wayfarers frequently articulate micro-narratives that stand in opposition to the idea of claiming state-sanctioned welfare benefits (unless related to long-term disability), but will engage in seasonal or sporadic employment. In part, this reflects the fact that being on the road militates against “signing-on” or establishing a “care-of-address”. It is equally apparent, though, that wayfarers regard casual or piecemeal employment as a bellwether of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency over a culture of worklessness and welfare dependency.

(6) Wayfarers tend to avoid, or else fleetingly engage, with formal homelessness services in major urban areas. In this regard, wayfarers seek their answers to homelessness away from the problematic temptations and dangers of the urban environment. It is,

moreover, a strategy that is often informed by a sense of restlessness which is shaped by a refusal of local communities to accept them. As such rough sleepers are expected to avail themselves of help and support while wayfaring and its emphasis on “choice” seems to imply the annulment of “active engagement”. It is arguably the case that the sense of transience, otherness and spatial exclusion that underpins (and is exacerbated by) wayfaring represents a significant obstacle to reconnecting with settled society.

(7) Wayfarers often view the “on-street” homeless in terms of three powerful emotions: fear, pity and contempt. For many older wayfarers younger rough sleepers are regarded as being workshy, habitual drug-users and potential perpetrators of crime and incivility.

(8) Wayfarers exhibit a very strong sense of cleanliness. Indeed, being “clean and tidy” involves undertaking fairly elaborate pollution rituals (Douglas, 2002). First and foremost, this is regarded as important in maintaining a sense of self-respect and personal dignity. Moreover, it is also viewed as providing distance between “men on the road” and the “on-street” homeless. By appearing presentable wayfarers are less likely to attract attention or popular ire, and thus more likely to enjoy success in soliciting work, transportation or accommodation.

The next section moves on to examine the causes and consequences associated with “coming off the road”.

Coming Off the Road

In the course of carrying out ethnographic research, I have encountered a number of wayfarers who, because of old age and growing infirmity, have taken the decision to “come off the road”. Typically these men have spent two decades or more wayfaring, interspersed with short bouts of sedentarism in temporary or supported accommodation. Taken together, transience and longevity have profound consequences in facilitating or hindering the transition back to “settled society”. As such this becomes an experience that is marked, for example, by difficulties associated with making a successful homelessness application on the basis of proving a local connection or gaining recognition as a legitimate user of localised social services.

On the question of coming off the road, "Robert" notes:

Even though I've had flats I get wary [of being sedentary and becoming settled] and quickly want to move on. Four walls can quickly do your head in [and] you just drift on again.

This echoes the experience of others:

Being inside and off the road feels claustrophobic, it's like being in God's waiting room. On the road I would get my head down early evening in the winter [now] I just watch the clock.

"Peter", having been on the road for the past twenty six years, discusses his desire to come off the "circuit" within the next twelve months.

It gets harder being on the road as you get older. I'm beginning to find it takes more effort [in physical and mental terms] I suppose.

Elaborating further:

The friary has closed. That was a great place. You can't go to Monkton Wilde or some of the other places [that were once available to wayfarers]. There are probably as many as two hundred places up and down the country that I know about...But [wayfaring and its traditions] will die out with this [current] generation.

Three significant issues are raised here. "Four walls can quickly do your head in" gives expression to a prevalent sentiment of restlessness, avidity for experience, and, of all forms of self-reliance, which militates against putting down roots in a particular place. Crucial here is the emphasis on freedom of movement and the choice of an (alternative) lifestyle. The second issue refers to the simple reality that "it gets harder being on the road as you get older" This is significant because it suggests that coming off the road is often experienced as an "enforced need" rather than an "expressed desire". A corollary of this insight, of course, is that some long-term wayfarers' simply reach the "end of the road" and feel the need to become more rooted in a particular place (see, for example, Cloke *et al*, 2003). The third issue to emerge here is the idea that "[wayfaring] will die out with this generation". Clearly, both the ageing profile of wayfarers together with the changing status or winnowing of "outsider" services would seem to give credence to this observation.

Conclusion

This article has been exploratory in nature, but its observations suggest that wayfaring needs to be rethought and pursued through new avenues. My account has been drawn directly on the experiences and practices of the very people whose quotidian life is conditioned by (in)voluntary movement and mobility and the constant search for temporary shelter. In seeking to understand the experience of wayfarers, we can begin to discern the influence that spatial practices hold in understanding the social and vice versa (Coles, 2008). Part of this task, however, requires that we resist the tacit assumption that, in our increasingly post-industrial society, “men of the road” are merely fictitious or mythical figures drawn from an earlier epoch. Wayfaring, like chronic and entrenched “on-street” homelessness is not accidental or aberrant. On the contrary, it is a direct response to a range of complex and interrelated material and psychosocial impulses such as poverty, substance misuse, marital discord, mental ill health and experiences of custodial care.

On the surface it would appear something of a paradox that wayfarers extensively and expressively articulate a “vocabulary of volition” (Hooper, 2003). Yet, the research reported here, suggests that we should not lose sight of the fact that homeless people actively produce and reproduce social structures including both repudiating the stigma and subculture associated with homelessness. This is not, however, to reject or demean the powerful or potent notion of “freedom of the road” contained within wayfaring. It is rather to see it as but one mode of social life in tension and therefore limited by others. Clearly, then, further understanding of this critically overlooked homeless “subculture” necessitates the emergence of a new cultural idiom which neither fetishes or negates wayfaring, but is finely attuned to the agency and resilience of these men who have hitherto been rendered invisible and unknowable in both the public sphere and academia.

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