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Editorial

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Peter spent the afternoon sitting in his wheelchair, with his back to the supermarket door and a carton of wine in his lap. On the crowded pavement, a little over four metres from a well-known Barcelona shopping street, it was an uncomfortable sight for the pedestrians going in and out of the supermarket, carrying plastic bags or taking their trolleys to do the shopping. His untidy, dirty appearance when he arrived at around 2 pm was compounded by the stench of urine from mid-afternoon onwards. Apart from his visual impact and the smell, the large, bearded man didn't interact with passers-by at all.

The new, strange presence of Peter caused local residents returning from work or going shopping to express two different reactions by making comments out loud: there were those who were clearly worried about the man in the wheelchair's state and there were others who expressed their annoyance at what they believed was incivility and the improper use of a public place. And of course, most people just continued on their way trying to absorb a combination of both feelings in silence.

During the afternoon, a patrol from the Guàrdia Urbana city police force came and talked to him on three occasions. All three times, the officers just talked to him for a few minutes and then walked away. By closing time for most of the shops on the street, the officers had informed the specialised Social Services teams about the case and were watching developments from a distance, driving by in their patrol car every now and then. Sometime after 10 pm, the man fell from his wheelchair onto the ground unconscious, due to the alcohol he had imbibed. Some local residents called the Medical Emergencies Services (SEM), but by the time the ambulance arrived, Peter had recovered consciousness and, with a little help, was back into his wheelchair, singing a song in his native language. The SEM specialists left, after asking him if he needed help and seeing that he refused any offer of a medical check-up.

From that moment onwards, some local residents and retailers, who had been following the situation all afternoon, began to show their anger. Some expressed their indignation because the Guàrdia Urbana 'hadn't done anything'. 'They came here three times and they didn't take him away', said a woman, seeking agreement from two people who were observing the man lying on the ground. Others focused their anger on the homeless man himself, considering him to be an example of incivility and the neighbourhood's decline. 'If they allow people to hang around here, without doing anything... what's going to happen? [...] there are more and more people like this on the street'.

Sometime after 11 pm, without the pressure from local residents and after a long conversation, two educators from municipal social services convinced Peter to let them take him to the Social Emergency Centre, to minimise the risks of spending the night outdoors after consuming a large

quantity of alcohol and because of his obvious inability to protect himself from the cold. The aim of the intervention was not to get the man off the street, but to reduce specific risks. This was certainly difficult to explain to local residents who were shocked by the obviously deteriorated condition of an adult who had settled down on a well-known shopping street.

In Barcelona, between 900 and 1,000 people sleep on the street every night. About 150 metres away from Peter, another man has been sleeping on a mattress in a corner of a quiet, narrow street for months. A number of local residents have approached him to offer solidarity and provide him with blankets and food, and there have also been complaints to the City Council about his presence, but he has never caused the same local-resident response, nor the same number of calls to the Guàrdia Urbana, the medical emergency services or social services.

The mere presence of Peter on a city street, which is conceived and imagined to be at the service of economic activities, makes it an act of "incivility". Staying on the street without buying anything, without moving, without doing anything productive, constitutes a source of conflict that is more intense with the higher commercial value of the place concerned. Lines of normality are drawn, based on the economic use of the urban area. Local residents who carry out their everyday activities within these limits of normality are surprised when the police do nothing about a clearly abnormal situation.

When what is behind the reactions of local residents is not annoyance or criticism but compassion, the onus of responsibility is transferred to the medical and social services. Once again, "homeless" persons or "tramps" are identified as "others" who have no rights. They are infantilised to the point where it is considered desirable for these services to protect them and take them out of the sight of the general public. It is thought that the Administration should act independently of these people's wishes, for their own good.

Peter is probably still living on the street. Emergency accommodation can be a chance to establish more lasting connections with social services and to find support, but when failures and frustration accumulate, the possibility of this connection becoming a reality, leading to a recovery process, becomes smaller and smaller. If he stays away from the city's main shopping streets, in a place of little commercial value, the chances are that local residents won't bother him and that visits from the Guàrdia Urbana will be scarce. If he stays in an out-of-the-way place, Peter will only be visited by street educators from the social services or an association of some kind.

Peter's situation reveals the limited scope of the Administration's actions. When faced with Peter's visible presence, local residents demand more places in hostels and more professionals (educators or police officers) on the street, to guarantee that someone will remove inappropriate inhabitants from the more visible areas of the city. Due to either the compassion or annoyance aroused by visible poverty on the street, it is easy for local residents to agree that 'something must be done', but the day-to-day management of coexistence and conflict requires looking beyond the emergency and questioning what the purpose of social intervention in public places really is.