

Craig Willse (2015)

***The Value of Homelessness:
Managing Surplus Life in the United States***

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.213, appr €25.

Craig Willse and I have had similar career paths. At loose ends after college, we both got jobs that immersed us in homelessness: I, in the mid-1980s when there was still an air of crisis surrounding this emergent phenomenon; and he, about a decade later when homelessness had become a well-entrenched feature of the urban landscape. For both of us, jobs working with homeless individuals were formative to our returning to academia. And here our paths diverge. My research has sought to understand homelessness in terms that are amenable to public policy responses. Willse, in contrast, in this book positions himself “outside the bounds of policy frames” (p.179) and argues that mainstream research and policy have rendered homelessness, at best, a manageable and marginal sideshow in a revanchist redrawing of the contemporary city and, at worst, the raw material that fuels a cottage industry of more research and services.

So what do we do when we research, study and craft policy towards homelessness? Willse has enough of an insider’s perspective to understand this world, yet takes an academic perch by bringing critical theory to bear on this praxis. While this is not the first time that work around homelessness has been portrayed as an industry that is self-serving and ultimately functions to deepen the social exclusion of homeless persons, this portrait sets out to be more systematic than most. As such, it offers an opportunity for reflection that should not be ignored.

If the reader has indeed come to this book interested in a praxis-based reflection on homeless research and services, as opposed to examining homelessness as grounds for exegesis on Foucauldian theory, then I recommend starting your read at chapter 4. Here the ideology of the first three chapters (more on these in a minute) eases and the heretofore turgid writing style clears as Willse hones in on two recent developments that have had profound impacts on current responses to homelessness. In chapter 4, Willse examines the ‘databasing’ of homelessness and the fundamental policy changes this has brought on, and chapter 5 focuses on the yin and yang of chronic homelessness and Housing First. Although the focus of both of these chapters is the US context, these two topics are universal enough to be readily translatable to European contexts. Willse shows an astute understanding of

both of these topics so that the chapters can each serve as primers, but he goes beyond this when he lays out dilemmas and offers a degree of ambivalence as to the larger implications of these policy shifts, which is otherwise missing in the book.

The key dilemmas are worth pointing out further. In chapter 4, Willse argues that mandatory data reporting, and resulting data-driven policy, has been instrumental in a shift from the traditional focus on homeless individuals to focusing on agency performance. Yet Willse questions whether the potential easing of such individual stigma actually leaves homeless persons better off. Similarly, in chapter 5 Willse readily sees the benefits of prioritizing long-term, chronically homeless households for housing that is delivered in a quick and relatively unfettered fashion. Yet, while applauding the inversion of a system that typically was least responsive to those who were homeless for the longest periods, he argues that this positive turn is mitigated by an underlying policy to facilitate “clear[ing] space in city centers to improve opportunities for capital reinvestment and growth” (p.154). Here, Willse provides new perspectives and thereby opens spaces for considering the broader impacts that these shifts in data collection and housing provision have had on the homeless population. For those readers at all involved or interested in Housing First, or who know what the acronym HMIS stands for, this is a rare opportunity to look at these topics beyond their utilitarian ends and more at how they fit into a broader picture.

For those readers with little interest in social theory, I offer a trigger warning of sorts that if you start this book from the beginning you may find the temptation to abandon it overwhelming. Absent an empirical agenda, the prose in the first three chapters are jargon-laden and ideological, more in the wheelhouse of those with a bent for cultural studies than policy. Homeless services get written off as “integrative projects of a homogenizing racial state... [that] have secured heteropatriarchal arrangements of labor and family along with the subordination of internally colonized populations,” (p.81) and the reader must adjust to being constantly bludgeoned with variants of ‘neoliberal’, with single paragraphs containing as many as seven mentions of this term (e.g., pp.102-103). Even to those inured to the excesses of sociological rhetoric, considerable labour is necessary for mining this swollen prose in search of some useful critique. I will leave it to someone better versed in social theory to evaluate the merits of Willse’s theoretical arguments, but as a monograph on homelessness the text is poorly documented and questionably accurate to the point of qualifying as polemic.

With the exceptions of chapters 4 and 5, this ideology-laden book is unlikely to bridge the gap between our respective academic paths. Few fellow denizens of what Willse terms the “nonprofit industrial complex” (p.167) will be predisposed to see something like Housing First through “the basic premises of Michel Foucault’s

thought” (p.181), and Willse gives no compelling reason for doing so. Willse is obviously capable of posing these issues in a manner that can engage a broader audience, and I hope that he will steer his future work in that direction. For this book, however, its overall appeal is limited by Willse’s apparent lack of interest in making this material accessible to anyone beyond a small academic coterie that will already be predisposed to his views.

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