

Don Mitchell

Mean Streets: Homelessness, Public Space, and the Limits of Capital

University of Georgia Press (Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation Ser. Book 47) pp.225, \$26.95 / €23.02

Criminalization of homelessness, where local responses to homelessness center upon law enforcement and displacement, is universally condemned as bad policy. Mayors and police chiefs regularly affirm that “you cannot arrest your way out of homelessness,” and numerous studies show how criminalization is fraught with constitutional issues, disproportionate public costs, and substantial personal harms. Even the Trump Administration, as it championed a greater role for police in responding to homelessness, asserted that “policies intended solely to arrest or jail homeless people simply because they are homeless are inhumane and wrong.”¹

Despite this, criminalization continues. In 2018, Los Angeles police arrested 14 000 people experiencing homelessness for life-sustaining activities. San Francisco spent \$20 million targeting people experiencing homelessness with laws against loitering, panhandling, and other quality of life offenses. And, in 2017, the majority of the 19 730 arrests (54 percent) in Portland, Oregon were of people experiencing homelessness (three percent of the overall population).² Only in the face of a pandemic has momentum slowed, with some prison and jail systems reducing populations of low-level offenders as a public health measure against the spread of COVID-19.

Against this backdrop, Don Mitchell provides a Marxist take on the dialectic of homelessness in public spaces. The clash between homelessness and the state is essentially a conflict over space, manifested in microcosms like panhandling in downtown business areas, hanging out in public parks, and subsisting in encamp-

¹ Council of Economic Advisors (2019). *The State of Homelessness in the U.S.* Accessed at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-State-of-Homelessness-in-America.pdf>

² Joseph W. Mead & Sara Rankin (2018). “Criminalizing Homelessness Doesn’t Work.” *Citylab* (June 20), available at: <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/06/how-not-to-fix-homelessness/563258/>; and Melissa Lewis (2018). “Take a Deeper Look at the Numbers Behind Portland Police Arrests of Homeless People” *The Oregonian* (June 27), available at: https://www.oregonlive.com/news/erry-2018/06/79b61635fd4450/portland_homeless_arrests_data.html.

ments. Taken together, these show a fundamental cleavage in capitalism, where, as wealth accumulates and interstitial urban spaces disappear, deprivation becomes more extreme and more exposed. Capitalism has no tools to resolve this conflict beyond reflexively responding to the underlying threat this poses “to property and the values it represents, to bourgeois sensibilities, and to city administrations’ abilities to control and regulate space within their jurisdictions” (p.68). Thus the punitive responses continue.

To gain a better understanding of this dialectic, Mitchell looks back to the early 20th century, which was the closest that homelessness got to a golden era in the US. This was when the itinerant labor of hoboos and tramps helped to settle the West and their cause anchored the radical part of the nascent labor movement. This suits Mitchell’s Marxist analysis well. The homeless take on the mantle of working-class heroes, while their exile from the city is necessary to maintain orderly flow and accumulation of capital. Mitchell lays out this fundamental dynamic in 1913 Denver (chapter 2), and updates it with contemporary clashes between localities and encampments (chapter 3). The “space of the tent” is crucial not only for survival, but also for “autonomy and organizing” (both 73). As such homelessness in public space represents both injustice and resistance:

Tent cities, though they must be eliminated if a just city is to arise, provide a model: as a taking of land, as a noncommodified and cooperative form of property and social relations, as (potentially) an organizational space tent cities and their progenitors like the hobo jungle have much to teach us about what it will take to create a city that does not express the limits of capital but overcomes them. (74)

Here radical aspirations meet capitalist fears, so that public spaces become the battleground for the criminalization of survival itself. Homeless people regroup and fight back, while local authorities use legal, administrative and technological means to escalate their push towards “banishment from the right to *inhabit* and to *make the city*” (p.90, italics in original). This point of conflict represents the vanguard – exposing both the limits of capital and the struggle for survival.

This culmination of Mitchell’s argument finishes up the first part of the book; the second part shows how the criminalization of homelessness has “metastasized” to broader segments of the urban milieu. In chapter 5, Mitchell argues that laws and court decisions on panhandling and other public interactions between classes have provided a foundation for an “SUV model of citizenship,” which privileges an individual’s right to insularity from exchanges they may find threatening. In chapter 6, Mitchell goes one step further and lays out the legal framework for how undesirable people, regardless of housing status, become banned outright from contested spaces. Then, in chapter 6, this is taken to a dystopic extreme in which people carry with them the status of trespasser and transgressor, existing at the mercy of

increasingly hostile and capable legal and technological apparatuses. By the end of the second part, capitalist dynamics, which are most visible in the context of homelessness, become manifest as central to capital itself.

Mitchell casts the criminalization of homelessness as a canary flitting about the urban coal mine, where its fate signals much larger geographic and economic upheavals in the making. Mitchell's eye here is on contradictions in capitalism, and homelessness is the setup. He is unapologetic in his role as a prophet who offers admonishments instead of solutions. Ultimately, "if we want to abolish homelessness, we must abolish capitalism" (p.160). In this respect, the book is an all or nothing Marxian take on homelessness which renders it of limited use for a more pragmatic approach to confronting the criminalization of homelessness. Mitchell's romantic, sepia version of homelessness as a legacy of early 20th century union activism suits his needs well, but is a poor fit for a more unwitting contemporary resistance borne from a position of submission and disenfranchisement. Here wins rarely come from individual victories and more from their lasting presence in the face of unceasing efforts at displacing them. The struggle is less heroic and class-based and more a humble search for dignity, to be left alone, and to regain housing.

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