

Review Symposium

Cameron Parsell

Homelessness: A Critical Introduction

Polity Press, 2023.

This is the book I have been waiting for, although I didn't know it before delving into it. *Homelessness* by Cameron Parsell is an impressive achievement in many ways. Rarely have I come across a book that gives such a comprehensive introduction to homelessness as a phenomenon and its wider societal implications and, at the same time, provides new insights. Parsell could have built his main arguments solely on his own extensive empirical and theoretical work, but he goes well beyond that by utilising not only the work of established homelessness researchers, but also research from sociology and political science. The list of references has around 600 titles.

Whether it was his intention or not, Parsell manages as a byproduct also to provide a critical introduction to the history of modern homelessness research. Parsell pays homage to several researchers whose work deserves to be better known in the homelessness sector. An example par excellence is the influential work of Joan Tronto on care.

Parsell sets the tone of his book right from the beginning by pointing out that we cannot address homelessness simply by tweaking existing systems and leaving unjust institutional arrangements in place. We must also meaningfully engage with the experiences and insights of those who are homeless who can themselves contribute to driving an agenda of social change. Even in his versatile discussion on the definitions of homelessness, Parsell refers to this red thread of his narrative: "Definitions of homelessness are not benign categories that are merely used to enumerate and allocate resources; they are conceptualized in a way to prescribe a proper way of living and of judging people as lacking when they do not meet the criteria set out in the definition. The *other people* need to be at the table when definitions about *their* lives are constructed."

When discussing homelessness as a societal problem, Parsell takes the realistic framework developed by Suzanne Fitzpatrick as his starting point. The framework analyses the causes of homelessness with reference to layered social reality and

considers multidirectional relationships and feedback loops between individual and structural forces. According to Parsell, the realistic framework emphasises the importance of examining whether people have control over actions that are assumed to cause their homelessness. The causes of homelessness need to be substantiated empirically, rather than it being assumed that either structural or individual conditions are pre-eminent.

Housing is obviously a fundamental issue both as a producer of homelessness and as a solution for it. But as Parsell points out “housing matters, but it matters in relation to other things”, especially in relation to other institutions in society. Homelessness and poverty go very much hand in hand, and this is the point where policies and state interventions can make a huge difference.

Each chapter in this book would deserve a specific handling of its own, but in particular Parsell’s subtle analysis of homelessness as the experience of violence, the dependency and autonomy of a homeless service user, and the identity and identification of people experiencing homelessness should be compulsory reading for everyone working to end homelessness.

In the daily lives of people who are homeless, violence, or the threat of violence, is all-pervasive. As Parsell says: “Homelessness means living in the shadow of danger”. Parsell provides a thorough analysis of different facets of violence and of different, always fragile, survival strategies people in homelessness are using. Parsell points out the gender disparities of violence. For women, domestic violence can be the reason for homelessness. For women who are homeless, relationships can be a way to avoid overt violence, but at the same time they may expose them again to violence, including sexual violence. In addition, different forms of informal accommodation can expose tenants to exploitative conditions. It is paradoxical that people who are homeless avoid services that should protect them from violence, like day centers or shelters, in fear of violence. Speaking about violence, once again Parsell’s conclusion is crystal clear: “It is the provision of housing that reduces crime and violence”.

For people who are homeless, home means a place of safety and security. In his own study of permanent supportive housing, Parsell found out that people with experiences of homelessness not only tolerated, but also appreciated the surveillance in the form of CCTV or concierge. After exiting homelessness, surveillance was the only time they felt safe. So, before condemning something as irretrievably old-fashioned and institutionalizing, it would be wise to ask first from the people who have experienced homelessness.

Parsell presents a wealth of material, both theoretical and empirical, on autonomy. He shows that for people who are homeless, receiving both voluntary and professional modes of help are experienced similarly in a way that replicates the experi-

ence of homelessness a subverted autonomy. These experiences of subverted autonomy are similar to those endured by people who are poor. The public perception of homelessness is still very much based on the stigmatised identity imposed upon people who are homeless, which assumes that homelessness is the defining attribute of the person who is homeless. As Parsell points out, research illustrates that people who are homeless construct their identities in ways that have deep and personal meaning, like family relations.

Parsell shows the huge spectrum of homelessness responses in different societies, including suppositions that people who are homeless “need to be moved, cared for, and sheltered, and even that they need to be changed”. What is common to all these different approaches, including criminalization and different punitive and coercive measures, is that they are paternalistic ways to manage homelessness. It also looks like the shelter model is still seen as the default response to homelessness even in many countries claiming to be implementing the Housing First model. This means that the staircase model with conditionality and the aim to get people who are homeless “housing ready” still persists despite all the criticism. Parsell nails this criticism spot on: “People generally do not want to be changed; they want housing. They may be willing and able to consider changes after they are securely housed”.

Parsell has some well-argued poignant criticism also on Housing First. The original Pathways Housing First Model developed by Dr. Sam Tsemberis was revolutionary in its own time and its merits on an individual level, especially with people with diagnosed psychiatric disabilities, are unchallenged and confirmed by extensive research. But its role in ending homelessness is more complicated. Parsell is especially critical of the cost-effectiveness rationales of Housing First. When ending homelessness is framed as a cost-saving endeavor it may have some unintended negative consequences. The focus on chronic homelessness, the sickest in the homelessness population who are the heaviest users of public services, excludes most of the homeless population. As Parsell formulates the dilemma: “The question is not whether people who are homeless are sick enough to house, it is a question of whether they are sick enough yet to house”.

So, the perverse logic of the staircase model persists, but in Housing First in a reversed form: you descend the stairs and, on your way, collect diagnoses and other burdens of life until you become chronically homeless and eligible for a Housing First programme. There’s a growing risk that Housing First in this fidelity form becomes part of the management of homelessness as a perfect, good quality, but restricted model for ending long-term, chronic homelessness, which eventually makes ending all forms of homelessness an even more distant goal. It is illuminating that after years of lobbying

and convincing, Housing First has finally entered the official EU liturgy. Still, it is hard to tell whether there is a reason to celebrate a breakthrough or lament the fact that Housing First has now become part of the management of homelessness.

In the last chapter, Parsell provides his bucket list for ending homelessness. It is not an easy list. Nothing less than transforming the way our societies are organised is needed. This may sound flamboyantly utopian, but Parsell has a very coherent logic in his argumentation. Before these final conclusions, Parsell presents a critical analysis of some recent initiatives: “what works” -initiative, the Vanguard Cities Initiative, and built for zero -initiative by Community Solutions. All these have their merits, but in Parsell’s thinking they present advocacy and work to improve our responses and systems of operation, but they say nothing, or even less do anything, about the structures within society that produce homelessness.

For Parsell, the experiences of Finland and Scotland represent something the transformation might look like. It would mean targeting Housing First at large scale homelessness rather than at individuals, with a strong emphasis on affordable housing stock. To end and prevent homelessness, society needs to be transformed so that we have significantly more affordable housing and significantly less poverty. It is also a question of reframing the problem. When homelessness is understood more in terms of society not producing a sufficient supply of affordable housing, it becomes a problem we, including decision makers, understand how it could be solved.

According to Parsell, providing significantly more affordable housing must fit within the social, cultural, and political reality of a country. For Parsell, this solution could be collaborative housing. Collaborative housing is an umbrella term including co-housing, residents cooperatives, self-help, self-build, community-asset ownership, and community land trusts. As Parsell points out, collaborative housing can also contribute to the reconceptualisation of supporting fellow citizens.

Parsell ends on an optimistic note. For Parsell, ending homelessness could be something unifying. It is about bringing society together rather than splintering it further, based on wealth and identity claims. Parsell refers to Marion Young’s concept of a community of difference where we come together for the collective good, but in a way that recognises and celebrates our differences.

Idealistic? Certainly, but in the current world this kind of idealism is a much needed and rare currency.

I read Parsell’s message as an encouragement and inspiration for the homelessness sector to break the boundaries and to create alliances with other bottom-up civil movements like the climate activists, the human rights advocates, and, should I

add, the democracy and peace activists. After all, it is a question of a common fight against profound and growing inequality and injustice. Yes, we need state interventions, but without the bottom-up pressure they tend to remain feeble and insufficient.

As not a single book is perfect, it should be necessary at this point to also say something critical. With this book it is difficult. So, I phrase my criticism by saying that I would have liked to read more about migration and its impact on homelessness services and policies. I also find other forms of homelessness than street homelessness extremely important to better understand the dynamic nature of homelessness and to develop more effective prevention. But that's probably another story.

All said, *Homelessness* by Cameron Parsell is a landmark achievement, a summary of his research and thinking, so far. It will be interesting to see where he goes next. This is a must read to all who are genuinely interested in ending homelessness, whether activists, researchers, or decisions makers. This book will also be an important reference point for all serious future homelessness research.

I have, at the same time, been reading Matthew Desmond's *Poverty, by America*. Sometimes this kind of parallel reading has unexpected consequences. I noticed that at some point these texts started to discuss and intertwine with each other so that in the end it was almost impossible to remember which text was from which book. How I wish that these two books were together in one book! I take the liberty to end with a quote from Desmond. This fits as well with homelessness as with poverty, but Desmond says this credo with stronger words, as can be expected from a Pulitzer Prize winner:

The end of poverty is something to stand for, to march for, to sacrifice for. Because poverty is the dream killer, the capability destroyer, the great waster of human potential. It is a misery and a national disgrace, one that belies any claim to our greatness. The citizens of the richest nation in the world can and should finally put an end to it. We don't need to outsmart this problem. We need to outdate it.

Juha Kaakinen

Tampere University, Finland

➤ References

Desmond, M. (2023) *Poverty, By America* (London: Penguin Books).

Parsell, C. (2023) *Homelessness* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press).

Homelessness: a critical introduction by Professor Cameron Parsell is a book that does what it says on the tin. It provides a clear and comprehensive introduction to what is known about homelessness and what can be done to address it. It does so, moreover, from a critical perspective: one that foregrounds the lived experiences of people who are homeless and interrogates the social and political contexts that produce those experiences. Perhaps most impressively, it does all this in a clear and accessible style that will appeal to both scholarly and non-scholarly (policy, practitioner) audiences, but without sacrificing nuance and complexity or shying away from big ideas.

The book provides an impressive synthesis of the research on homelessness and distils this into some clear and powerful conclusions about the nature of the problem and what it will take to solve it. The central argument is that homelessness is a product of how we chose to organise our societies and that addressing homelessness thus requires nothing less than deep social-structural transformation. This is established in Chapter 2, which reviews the literature on the causes of homelessness, highlighting the fundamental role played by shortages of affordable housing and persistent poverty, and describing how these interact with individual/household vulnerabilities to trigger homelessness for individual households. This insight is then mobilised throughout the book to make sense of different aspects of homelessness, ranging from the experiences and identities of people who are homeless to the interventions and systems developed to respond to it.

Whilst the idea that homelessness is a collective choice raises questions about differential access to power and decision making (which I will return to below), this argument is nevertheless a welcome pivot from the dominant technocratic framings of homelessness which treat it as an isolated problem facing discrete populations in an otherwise well-functioning market system. As shown in Chapter 8, these technocratic framings, which are common in policy making and policy-oriented research, tend to reduce homelessness to individual/group deficiencies that can be addressed through practice and service system innovations and better data. They thus fail to confront the deep structural drivers of homelessness outlined by Parsell in earlier parts of the book.

Against this technocratic conception, the book offers what Wacquant (2012) calls a 'thick' sociological conception of homelessness that connects individual problems and experiences to the design and operation of social institutions, which include everything from housing systems to the welfare state structures to the patriarchal and racialized organisation of everyday social relations (class is somewhat absent from the account). Pleasingly, it does this without an overreliance on overly vague or

morally-charged theoretical abstractions, which the critical scholarship on homelessness is sometimes prone to, and instead keeps its theoretical claims grounded in the lived realities and empirical regularities of homelessness.

The middle chapters of the book focus on the experience of homelessness, including accessing homelessness services, and the social relations and identities it produces (Chapters 3-5). The experience of homelessness is described as one of pervasive violence, both received and perpetrated, which arises from people being denied the security and control that home typically provides (Chapter 3). The experience of accessing homelessness services (Chapter 4), including both temporary/supported accommodation and grass-roots charity, is one of 'subverted autonomy', as people are forced to depend on others to meet basic needs that housed populations can provide for themselves (shelter, food, personal hygiene, etcetera), leaving them susceptible to the scrutiny and control of those ostensibly supporting them. Being without housing thus (re)configures people's relationships with others in society, positioning them as deficient and in need of 'fixing'. A distinct homelessness identity thus emerges—the homeless 'Other'—that is premised on presumed inherent differences that are in fact the product of housing deprivation and poverty (Chapter 5).

The final chapters of the book are dedicated to what can and should be done to address homelessness (Chapters 6-8). After reviewing a range of existing responses and debates thereover (Chapters 6 and 7), Parsell returns to his argument that addressing homelessness requires nothing less than social structural transformation (noting that, even when evidence-based and housing-led, discrete policies and interventions alone are unable to address homelessness' structural causes). He provides some concrete suggestions as to what this might entail in the second half of Chapter 8.

After first making the case that we must 'chang[e] the way we think about homelessness' (p188) to enable greater structural intervention, Parsell contends that the expansion of the 'collaborative housing' sector is the most practicable way of achieving the transformations required. Central to his reasoning here is the idea that collaborative housing—which can involve anything from cohousing to cooperatives to community land trusts—can appeal to both progressive (collectivist) and conservative (communitarian, anti-statist) constituencies. Its effectiveness is purported to lie in its ability to break with the deepening commodification that is driving the shortages and unaffordability of housing and, by extension, contributing to homelessness. It is also seen as enabling lower-income or otherwise marginalised groups greater autonomy through enhanced participation and control over their housing circumstances. Whilst this section can at times feel a little ungrounded and even utopian (which is perhaps inevitable when discussing transformative

change), its arguments do resonate with the historic experience of some European nations, where community/NGO led approaches to social housing provision has made for more resilient and democratic controlled decommodified housing sectors than in more state-centred models (e.g. Blackwell & Bengtsson, 2023).

Overall, there is much to recommend this book to readers with various interests and backgrounds. The linking of lived experiences with structural causes, the nuance review of multiple research literatures, and the ambitious proposals all make for compelling reading and even optimism and hope for change. However, no book this ambitious and wide ranging is without its limitations.

One possible criticism of the book is that the argument that homelessness is the product of collective choices about how we organise society risks eliding important inequalities in the power of different groups to influence (and benefit from) those choices. There are large numbers of people disadvantaged by existing modes of housing and welfare provision who would likely choose to rearrange these systems if given the opportunity, and there are indeed many activists and reformers actively trying to do so. Yet, these efforts are actively resisted by those who benefit from how these systems currently operate. One only needs to think of the resistance to housing reforms in societies where high rates of homeownership produce large (if diminishing) constituencies and powerful institutions (especially financial institutions) who benefit from the treatment of housing as a commodity.

Acknowledging these inequalities in power is important to both understanding and challenging the structural processes that produce social problems like homelessness. This raises some challenges for the approach to addressing homelessness proposed in the book, which seeks ways of framing and addressing the problem that 'don't pit one group against another' (p. 198). Collaborative housing may help to address some of these challenges, insofar as it can enable genuine shared decision-making and, as claimed in the book, a means of aligning the interests of diverse stakeholders including 'central and municipal governments, lending institutions, local communities, and housing providers' (p. 193). However, the fact that actors like financial institutions have a significant interest in the perpetuation of prevailing system (which they have played a central role in creating; Aalbers, 2016), this may prove challenging to realise in practice.

Notwithstanding this, the broader thrust of Parsell's argument—that homelessness cannot be addressed without transforming the societies that produce it—remains highly compelling, as does his nuanced and balanced critique of existing policy and practice responses. Ultimately, *Homelessness: A Critical Introduction* is an accessible and authoritative statement on one of today's most pressing social problems.

Its wide-ranging synthesis of the research literature, coupled with its deep critical insights, means that this book is essential reading for anyone interested in homelessness, whether they be policy makers, practitioners, researchers, or students.

Andrew Clarke

University of New South Wales, Australia

➤ References

Aalbers, M. (2016) *The Financialization of Housing: A Political Economy Approach* (London: Routledge).

Blackwell, T. and Bengtsson, B. (2023) The Resilience of Social Rental Housing in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Denmark. How Institutions Matter, *Housing Studies* 38(2) pp.269-289.

Wacquant, L. (2012) Three Steps to a Historical Anthropology of Actually Existing Neoliberalism, *Social Anthropology* 20(1) pp.66-79.

I tend to dislike books billed as “introductions.” As a scholar, if I want to familiarize myself with a body of scholarship I turn to annual review articles in top academic journals. They are almost always more nuanced and on the cutting edge than introductory volumes. As a teacher, I avoid assigning them. They typically lack depth and interpretive range. They rarely provide the spark for generative discussion provided in primary texts. And while I sometimes might suggest them to practitioners, policymakers, or general readers trying to wrap their heads around an issue, I also hesitate. Even if introductory books provide a stellar overview of empirical studies on a given subject, they are often void of critique, skate over scholarly disputes, and are frequently unmoored from broader constitutive social and political contexts.

Homelessness: a critical introduction by Cameron Parsell, however, is a refreshing break to this genre. As with any good introductory text, it is comprehensive and clearly written with accessible analysis. Yet, the volume doesn't shy away from nuance and complexity, dives more deeply into specific case studies, brings readers right up to the latest research, and integrates the lived experiences of the unhoused that are so often lacking.

Furthermore, the book is critical from start to finish. Chapter one interrogates the varied state, scholarly, and folk classifications of “homelessness.” The conclusion takes on the “myth of solving homelessness through more evidence and better practices” widely circulating among many homeless industry consultants and technocrats (which I return to below). Rather than tying itself to a narrow coverage of homelessness, Parsell's analysis, pushes readers to see homelessness not only as a form of exclusion in and of itself, but a state that reinforces broader social exclusions of race, ethnicity, citizenship; a key site where citizens exercise their voluntary care and compassion; and “a bellwether for how society is travelling” (p.9).

The book's central argument is that homelessness in the Global North is a societal problem, punishing to those who experience it, and only solvable through deep structural transformations. This is established in the book's first section, which elaborates the fundamental roles played by affordable housing shortages, poverty, lack of citizenship, and racism and how these interact with individual vulnerabilities that trigger homelessness. The book then moves out from this foundation to make sense of (a) how people experience homelessness with its associated violence and stigma (b) how it is states respond to homelessness through the welfare and penal state and (c) what societies can do to better address and ultimately abolish homelessness.

While more extensive summaries of the book, its chapters, and key arguments have been published in the first set of reviews in this symposium (see Clarke, 2024 and Kaakinen, 2024) and elsewhere (Lindsay, 2024), I'll focus here on three key merits of Parsell's exceptional contribution from a US perspective. I also consider where it might help us push future research, policy, and politics on solutions.

Internationalizing Homelessness Research

The book brings together research from across the Global North and wealthy democracies including Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, UK, countries across Europe, and a select cases from Asia, namely Japan and Singapore. Compared to other introductory volumes I appreciate, such as the recently published *In Midst of Plenty* by Khadurri and Shinn (2021), that focus more exclusively on the US, Parsell's international perspective not only expands the empirical scope of findings but denaturalizes many taken for granted aspects of homelessness as perceived by US based scholars and practitioners.

For instance, Parsell begins the first chapter examining the state definitions of homelessness. In the US, homelessness is most frequently defined as being sheltered and unsheltered, Canada includes those provisionally accommodated, Japan only those sleeping rough, while the European typology defines homelessness through physical, social, and legal domains. Parsell pushes readers to think about these definitions not merely as technocratic census tools, but political techniques used by politicians trying to project that the homeless problem is contained, activists trying to broaden the issue in public importance, and social and cultural norms around home, kinship, and property.

Most of the book's curation of international sources aims at bringing together "a vast international knowledge base that offers insights that may transcend national and cultural contexts to advance societal change to better deal with and ideally prevent homelessness" as Parsell puts it (p.10). But sometimes Parsell's reach for transcendence is muddled, when international comparisons might have instead been leveraged towards analytic clarity. For instance, the section on "Race" and homelessness brings together an impressive collection of demographic trends, but lumps disparities of race, ethnicity, nationality, and caste all together. And although the book doesn't encompass areas outside of the Global North, it might have still considered theories and frameworks from research in the Global south to understand the dynamics of homelessness under investigation in wealthy democracies as done by scholars such as Ananya Roy and Jessie Speer.

Bridging a Fractured Field

Over the last 20 years, and especially the last decade, research on homelessness has increased exponentially across the social sciences. It has also become more siloed. Parsell's book is exemplary in its comprehensiveness, covering over 600 titles, including many published in just the last 5 years. More impressive though is its synthesis in threading these works together and bridging what has become an increasingly fractured field of study.

First is the bridge between quantitative and qualitative research. Many sections begin with a thorough review of survey data. For instance, tracking the disproportionate rates of racial and ethnic minorities, migrants, and indigenous groups experiencing homelessness; the disproportionate experience of violence; the prevalence of those relying on charity; or survey findings showing those objectively defined as homeless by the state, do not actually identify themselves as homeless. Parsell then goes on to explain these statistical trends through in-depth qualitative studies and illuminating vignettes excerpted from several studies, including his own.

Second, the book brings together an analysis of penal and welfare state responses to homelessness into a unified frame of analysis. Chapter 6 on "responses to homelessness" synthesizes studies typically kept separate – namely those of charity and shelters by scholars of social welfare and those of policing public space by criminal legal scholars. Though not explicitly citing Wacquant, Parsell follows his prescription of the need to "reconnect social policies and penal policies and treat them as two modalities of poverty policy to grasp the new politics of urban marginality" (2009).

Most significantly, in this chapter and others, is the book's focus on the homeless experience that is present throughout. As Parsell puts it, "The experience of homelessness throws life into an unpredictable chaos that whereby one becomes reliant on the care, and subject to the control, of others: often on both." He goes on to elaborate how different forms of charity and policing can "subvert aspects of basic human life and dignity that we take for granted." Parsell's research round-up and critiques in this chapter are particularly urgent and useful for policymakers and advocates in the US. With the recent Supreme Court recently repealing the most basic protections against criminalizing those sleeping in public space with nowhere else to go, and public debates continue to center around definitions of "involuntary homelessness" in relation to "adequate shelter," the book's overview of the ineffectiveness of criminalization and shortcomings of shelter are more important than ever.

Third, the book takes us further than most in bridging studies homelessness and housing. In a 2018 essay, sociologist Mathew Desmond lamented that the study of homelessness has become “something quite distinct from the study of housing. “As scholars became more interested in describing the subculture and survival techniques of street people.” Desmond writes, “the link between homelessness and housing dynamics evaded serious treatment.”

The book’s initial chapter examines research showing the fundamental role of the lack of housing affordability in causing homelessness and the critical role of state interventions in housing markets in preventing it. But it also shows how housing matters in relation to other things – including institutions of employment, welfare, other social conditions such as lack of family support and familial conflict, subjective identities and social labels.

The final two chapters cover housing research and policies as solutions to homelessness, is also more robust than existing primers on the topic. Chapter 7 on “supportive housing model” concisely dismantles the emerging populist and political critiques of housing first. Parsell does this by taking on the recent book of Stephen Eide, a political philosopher turned “homelessness expert” at the US based Manhattan Institute, a right-wing think tank. Eide’s critiques of housing first’s harm reduction approach and calls for the return to “treatment-first” and “shelter-first” models may sound surprising to European readers. However, it has become the blueprint of many conservative leaders, including governors of states like Florida and Texas, as well as former, and perhaps future, President Trump.

Nonetheless, Parsell also draws critiques from the existing research. Rationing a select pool of housing towards the sickest “chronically homeless” based on short-term cost-benefit analyses, means depriving housing to others who must wait, decline, suffer and become costly enough in terms of medical, carceral, and social services to be awarded housing. According to Parsell, “the cost motivations mean that housing is not considered a resource and entitlement that citizens deserve, but something government’s give for clinical or health economic reasons,” furthering the pathologizing of poverty (p.172). The book goes further, spotlighting the emerging critical work in this area that shows how cost offsets that overwhelm housing as a right can in turn undermine the permanency and quality of this housing. However, unlike Eide who argues for the roll-back of supportive housing, Parsell asserts we must continue and improve it, while expanding broader forms of universal social and cooperative housing.

Critical and Solution-Oriented Scholarship

The “critical” streak running throughout this Introduction to homelessness should already be clear from this review. Unlike so many introductions that simply spoon feed readers lessons and key takeaways from social scientific research, Parsell pushes readers to grapple with the tensions, limits, and challenges that this research presents, albeit with impressive clarity and accessibility. The chapters are largely organized dialogically: presenting evidence, critique, and then a concluding synthesis. Many mirror the sorts of seminar discussions I hold with students at UCLA, but also reflect the debates and discussions I’ve observed and participated in with activists and policymakers across the globe regarding the “wicked problems” of homelessness.

Yet readers should not misread the “critical” subtitle as an engagement with “critical urban theory.” The works of critical urbanists such as Don Mitchell, Neil Smith, and Michele Lancione are referenced in specific chapters. However, the book does not draw on their works to link contemporary homelessness and its regulation to the broader transformations of financialized real estate, inter-urban capitalist competition, post-colonial migration management, advanced marginality, or racial capitalism. It may have been wise to steer clear of some of these texts riddled with overly vague and morally charged abstractions for a general readership. But in arguing for the need for deep structural societal transformation, these works seem especially relevant, and their omissions unfortunate.

Unlike much of the critical scholarship and social science introductions to homelessness more generally the book’s conclusion focuses extensively on solutions. Parsell’s central critique is aimed at the philosophy and practices addressing homelessness by a range of actors across the globe such as UK’s Centre for Homelessness Impact, the Vanguard Cities Initiative, and the Macarthur Foundation funded Community Solutions “Built for zero initiative.” Exemplifying this framework is Linda Gibbs of Bloomberg Associates and colleagues who examined homelessness in ten global cities (2021). They assert what is needed to end unsheltered homelessness is a concerted move toward “a coordinate system of care whereby clients rationally receive the most appropriate services through a shared system of assessment and intake, with a commitment to measuring impact backed up with rigorous evaluations” (2021, p.33). This can be mainly accomplished through a technocratic brand of urban governance, marked by strong mayoral leadership with the assistance of professional consultants sharing best practices.

According to Parsell these organizations present “work to improve our responses and systems of operation – often based on evidence – even as they say nothing, much less do anything, about the structures within society that produce homeless-

ness and make sustainable exit for the majority impossible.” He also sees the call for better evidence as ignoring the deeply embedded ideological ideas about the role of individual vs. collective responsibility.

In contrast to tweaking policies toward optimization, Parsell argues for “nothing short of societal transformation.” The book provides a vision of what this might look like. It points to studies demonstrating benefits of regulating corporate rental investments and state interventions in subsidizing affordable housing. Finland and Scotland are detailed as cases that have made measurable progress towards societal transformation to end and prevent homelessness. Most compelling is Parsell’s elaboration of de-commodified “collaborative housing.” Drawing on the work of Darinka Czischke (2018) and others, collaborative housing centers on tenant agency, where groups collectively organize to take land and housing stock of the market to instead be managed and delivered affordably by collectives.

But how do we reach these solutions? While the book is strong on presenting alternatives and solutions, it is much weaker in identifying what actions, organizing, and politics might help us get there. It is in many ways similar to sociologist Mathew Desmond’s latest book “Poverty, by America,” a similarly synthetic introduction to the topic of poverty, both strong in its diagnoses of the problem of, and, unlike his first book *Evicted*, exceptionally strong on policies that would abolish it. Parsell and Desmond make clear that wealthy democracies have both the means and state authority to abolish homelessness and poverty, we simply lack the political will.

Parsell and Desmond also put forward clear moral arguments and reframing’s of the problems of homelessness and poverty. Parsell concludes “To activate this political will, not only can we frame homelessness as the systematic exclusion of people in multiple ways, we can also highlight what their compound deprivation means for how they live and how this contrasts with our values for society.” While I agree with Parsell that “evidence-based research” does not always, or even most the time, activate political will, moral arguments alone also don’t have very strong records in inciting social transformation

While the book provides progressive policies and visions in addressing homelessness, we also urgently need guidance on building the sort of political coalitions and strategies that might deliver them. Since the 2008 global financial crises, the US has seen a resurgence of housing rights movement organizations, tenant unions, and political demands of increased affordable and social housing. Since 2020, housing has re-emerged to appear on political platforms beyond local government, in state and presidential politics for the first time since the 1970s.

During this same time housing movements and organizations across European cities have reconfigured municipal, state, and even national politics from Berlin to Barcelona. The questions as to what coalitions and tactics work and why in some places and not others is also something the book's international comparative scope would have been especially helpful. I hope another scholar will take on this task, but Parsell provides us not only a new standard foundation to build from, but also a novel and compelling vision of homelessness' abolition.

Chris Herring

University of California, Los Angeles, USA

› References

Czischke, D. (2018) Collaborative Housing and Housing Providers: Towards an Analytical Framework of Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration in Housing Co-Production, *International Journal of Housing Policy* 18 (1) pp.55–81.

Desmond, M. (2018) Heavy Is the House: Rent Burden among the American Urban Poor, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42(1) pp.160–70.

Desmond, M. (2023) *Poverty, by America* (New York: Crown).

Gibbs, L., Bainbridge, J., Rosenblatt, M, and T. Mammo (2021) *How Ten Global Cities Take on Homelessness: Innovations that Work* (California: University of California Press).

Lindsay, S. M. (2024) A Review of Homelessness: A Critical Introduction (Cameron Parsell), *International Journal on Homelessness*, 4(2) pp.1–13.

Parsell, C. (2023) *Homelessness: A Critical Introduction* (London: John Wiley & Sons).

Shinn, M. and J. Khadduri (2020) *In the Midst of Plenty: Homelessness and What to Do about It* (London: John Wiley & Sons).

Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham: Duke University Press).