

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.

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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.

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