The Provocations of Homelessness – The Zeitgeist and its Critics: A Review Essay

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The Routledge Handbook of Homelessness, by Bretherton, J. & Pleace, N. (Eds.) (2023) Oxford & New York: Routledge

For a Liberatory Politics of Home, by Lancione, M. (2023) Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Mean Streets: Homelessness, Public Space and the Limits of Capital, by Mitchell, D. (2020) Athens: University of Georgia Press

It is the contention of this essay that collectively the three recently published books cited above deftly capture the essence of and the controversy associated with the 'zeitgeist' – the intellectual, moral and cultural climate – of early 21st century homelessness research and scholarship.[1] The essence of this zeitgeist is twofold: The emergence of a refined narrative of causation which promotes a contextual reading of homelessness as the outcome of a complex combination of personal/individual and structural/systemic causes and the fusion of this 'new orthodoxy' with a paradigm shift in which 'housing-ready' has been superseded by 'housing-led'[2] in many (though not all) homelessness policy agendas. This zeitgeist however is also

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[1] This is not to suggest that these books are in anyway unique in this respect. Other publications which arguably achieve the same or similar ends are of course available. Indeed within a few months of the publication of Bretherton and Pleace's *Handbook*, Routledge itself had published a further handbook *Global Perspectives on Homelessness, Law & Policy* (Chris Bevan, 2024) and Edward Elgar had published its own *Research Handbook on Homelessness* (Johnson *et al* 2024). The overlap in authorship between these three publications is conspicuous.

[2] The terminology has become a little blurred: in most circumstances and certainly in this essay 'housing-led' – otherwise known as 'rapid rehousing' denotes programmes that provide permanent housing as quickly as possible for all who need it. 'Housing-first' in its original formulation in the USA was designed specifically for chronic homelessness with attendant support. See: Homeless Link Policy & Research Team (2015).

characterised by a challenging discrepancy: While we know an awful lot about its causes and potential treatment, homelessness nevertheless persists and is intensifying rapidly in many rural and especially urban environments.[3] It is this failure of purpose which defines and encapsulates the provocations[4] of homelessness referred to in the title of this essay.

Each of the publications considered here are major works of scholarship. Together they tackle a wide breadth of sometimes overlapping issues, yet each has a distinctive, identifiable focus. In *Mean Streets*, Don Mitchell's objective is to systematise 'a *theory* of the social and economic logic' behind the persistence of homelessness; in *Liberatory Politics*, Michele Lancione challenges the current conceptual frameworks and established norms of how we interpret and study 'homelessness' and especially 'home'- an *epistemological endeavour.* Among the numerous themes that characterise the *Handbook* edited by Joanne Bretherton and Nicholas Pleace, *praxis* – relating to the strategies, policies, programmes and performance of those agencies (including the state) charged with the delivery of homelessness services – stands out as the most pervasive. These three complementary themes – praxis, epistemic and theory – provide the analytical framework for the following exploration of the provocations of homelessness.

Praxis Provocations

Bretherton and Pleace's edited collection is a 'big' book both in its intellectual scope and in its physical size: 41 chapters, 450 pages and near 2 million words. In marshalling contributions from a host of respected and established researchers (45 in total) and in contributing their own distinctive and always illuminating overview commentaries, the editors are to be congratulated.

The *Handbook* encompasses a wide range of homelessness issues, inter alia: history, causation, measurement, disciplinary approaches, and various dimensions of homelessness – gender, sexuality, migration, ethnicity, rural and veteran experiences, health, substance use, and the human costs of homelessness. In these and other chapters the issues highlighted by the editors in their conclusion

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[3]   For recent European trends see https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/07/15/homelessness-on-the-rise-in-uk-and-france-how-do-european-countries-compare [Accessed May 2025]

[4]   Mirosław Karwat (2023) in his authoritative *Theory of Provocation* defines provocation as any behaviour, event or situation that stimulates a response. These behaviours, events and situations can be small or large in scale, from a conversational gambit to a declaration of war; they can be classified as constructive (leading to positive change) or destructive (negative change). The focus of this essay is the 'condition' of homelessness and the 'responses' it has recently provoked in terms of developing our understanding and knowledge among practitioners and policy makers and within academia and the wider research community.

'of mutually reinforcing relationships [of homelessness] with inequality, poverty and stigmatisation' (p. 434) are demonstrated. The final section, comprising one-third of the book, presents 17 concise country case studies. *As an 'educational resource' (p.1) and a 'reference text' (p. 9)* – the Handbook fulfils its purpose in identifying key theoretical and methodological issues all closely linked to the praxis of homelessness service delivery.

Given the book's coverage and achievements it might seem a touch invidious to gripe about perceived absences, yet inevitably there are some. The editors acknowledge that the focus is on the global north (plus Australia, China and Japan) and reasonably claim that this reflects the geography of the bulk of published scholarship. Yet the absence of virtually any reference to the iniquitous levels of homelessness among the 40 percent of the world's population living in Africa, the Indian sub-continent, Latin America, [5] the Caribbean and Russia is disappointing. Further, the immediate voices of 'homelessness' are underrepresented, ethnographic narratives hardly get a look-in and regrettably, while there are scattered references – in what arguably can be seen as the most striking absences – there is no extended consideration of the interrelated issues of the operation of housing markets or of homelessness prevention strategies. [6]

If there is a shared message among the many and diverse contributions [7] to this *Handbook* it is that in recent times there has been tangible progress in advancing both our understanding of the nature and composition of homelessness in all its complexity and in utilizing this enhanced understanding in instigating a praxis which deploys effective programmes and policies designed to alleviate the plight of homelessness people.

The country chapters (24 to 41) clearly record the widespread recognition and – though less widespread – adoption of the new paradigm whereby housing-first and housing-led programmes have been accepted as effective advancements on previously dominant housing-ready approaches. And – while 'zombie ideas' (p. 31-32) still persist in relation to causality – the concomitant acceptance of a structural understanding of homelessness as a social phenomenon is endorsed. While such acceptance and adoption is to be celebrated, the *Handbook*'s contributors also recognise that the implementation of these programmes varies considerably across

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[5]   With the one exception of Uruguay, see Chapter 40

[6]   COVID's interruption of the publication timeline – a 5 year gap between commission and printing – might account for some of these 'deficiencies'. See Nicholas Pleace's chapter on COVID-19 and Homelessness (Chapter 7).

[7]   There are many other interesting themes in the *Handbook* which for want of time and space are not touched on in this review. As one example only: on the 'changing face of homelessness' as a consequence of climate change and migration.

geo-political jurisdictions from, for example, high commitment in Finland and Denmark (Chapters 28 & 27)[8] through to a token or no commitment in Poland, Slovenia and China (Chapters 34, 36 & 26)

Embedded within this uneven embrace of the zeitgeist are advances in many protocols, policies, methodologies and practices though, as with the zeitgeist as a whole, their chronological and geographic adoption and implementation is also uneven (see Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Foremost among the acknowledged advances is the recognition of the importance of evidence-based decision making and the parallel adoption of clearer and inclusive definitions of homelessness plus a corresponding increasing sophistication of data collection and data analysis.[9] FEANTSA's typology of homelessness – ETHOS – has been instrumental here in an attempt to provide a common language (Edgar, 2012). Yet comparability of collected data across jurisdictions remains challenging due to the persistence of variations in definitions, data collection methods and reporting practices (Chapter 4 & 12; editorial commentary, pp 2-5).[10]

The contributions to Section 3 of the *Handbook*, 'The Dimensions of Homelessness', provide substantive illustrations of progress. The compilation of knowledgeable and informative accounts of homelessness among such heterogeneous groups defined on the basis of gender, sexuality, age, family disposition, migration status, substance use, rurality, veteran status and so forth is itself a testimony to an expanding and inclusive evidence base. That this base is still 'rapidly shifting' (p.147) and that 'significant gaps' (p. 433) remain reflect continuing problems of identification, access and accurate reporting of 'homelessness as a relative state' (p. 2) and, equally importantly, the impact of conceptual advances in understanding the diversity within these subgroups and their intersectionality with wider social, political and cultural processes.

The adoption of 'strength-based' (person centred) approaches to social and medical care with an accompanying emphasis on empowerment and the identification and development of capacities (agency) of individuals is a further indicator of praxis progression (Chapters 9, 12 & 22). In the related deliberations on welfare systems (Chapter 6) and complex needs (Chapter 21) it is implied that these social

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[8] As of April 2024 Sweden can be added to this list: https://www.staff.lu.se/article/finally-housing-first-model-adopted-national-strategy [Accessed May 2025]

[9] The term 'evidence based' is however fiercely contested within social science. See for example, Stanhope (2011)

[10] See also ''European Homelessness Counts a study commissioned by the European Commission to develop a common methodology of data collection on homelessness in the EU. https://www.internationalhu.com/research/projects/european-homelessness-count [Accessed June 2025]

care policies/ programmes are strongly and logically associated with societies where social welfare programmes are comprehensive and inclusive – especially Nordic countries (Chapters 6 & 21)

The 'right to housing' (Chapter 5) was initially highlighted in UN 1948 Human Rights Declaration and incorporated in the 1976 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. More recently a 'rights perspective' structured the 2021 EU *Lisbon Declaration on Combatting Homelessness* and is now embedded in the constitutions of several EU and other countries while elsewhere justiciable rights to housing have been enshrined in law. Adoption of the right to housing does not obligate individual countries to provide housing for all its citizens – the praxis implications are more modest. Right to housing does however facilitate the creation of a legal bulwark for the enforcement of legislation regarding such issues as ensuring security of tenure and protection against discrimination and, in its most generous interpretation, the obligation to house homeless people. Increasing commitment to the right to housing is seen as emblematic of a growing aspiration to ensure all citizens are adequately housed and importantly provides a further stimulus to tackle the inherent problems of homelessness. Welcome though the embrace of homelessness in the human rights agenda is, [11] it is also the case that these rights are all too frequently violated with impunity. This dissonance between housing rights (an ethical principle) and homelessness (a social injustice) demonstrates that 'what is passed into law is not always enforceable by law' – legislation is never enough. [12]

Among other advances highlighted in the *Handbook* is the debunking of homelessness myths associated with causation (Chapter 3), addiction (Chapter 22) and homelessness among families/ women and children (Chapters 11 &16). Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) use of cluster analysis on time series data in demonstrating that long-term homelessness is accounted for by a relatively small number of chronic homeless while more numerous episodic and crisis homelessness is generally short term and often a one-off experience has been particularly influential – for both its findings and in introducing a methodology that has been replicated by many (Chapter 3). Addiction and mental health problems are now demonstrably as much a product of homelessness as they are a contribution to homelessness (Chapter 22). Homelessness among families (women and children) is predominantly due to domestic abuse and poverty rather than to individual/ personality traits or behaviours; in the world of homelessness women are resilient survivors. Chapter 8 on 'Crime, punishment and homelessness' finishes with the observation, 'it is clear that punitive vagrancy and anti-begging legislation and policies are not novel

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[11] For some reservations see Fitzpatrick and Watts (2010)

[12] For background on these and related issues in the EU see: Edgar, Doherty, & Meert (2002)

[recent] but rather have a long history' (p. 93). In this long history much has changed, some things for the better, but the criminalisation and penalisation of homeless people continue unabated albeit under new guises (Chapters 8 & 10).

The above are all important insights but arguably the most important and funda-mental advance in our understanding of the dynamics of homelessness as illus-trated in this *Handbook* is that personal / individual problems are proportionately unrelated to the length of time people are likely to remain homeless and deprived of adequate housing. Rather it is the shortage of move-on housing and concomi-tantly the scarcity of permanent, secure accommodation that is the main obstacle.

Alongside – and in contrast to – the recording of 'advances', there is another discernible message that runs through the *Handbook* (though more often 'whispered' than 'proclaimed'); a message that cautions against hubris. Caution that arguably is very much needed as the mantra of 'ending homelessness' is promulgated by ever more programmes and policies (Finland has a lot to answer for). We know a lot about homelessness and will continue to learn and understand more about this fiendishly complex issue but presently as the continuing high levels of homelessness demonstrate the problem shows few signs of abating, let alone ending – this is a failure of purpose. Given these circumstances it is puzzling that in this *Handbook* there is so little coverage, other than fleeting commentary, of the role and impact of either the operation of the housing market or of prevention strategy, or of the links between them. Time and again the narratives and arguments presented in the *Handbook* point to the importance of both but in a fractured and isolated way. [13] A handbook which claims to be a reference and educational text is surely remiss in not facing these issues head on.

Historically prevention has long been part of the 'bread and butter' operations of most NGOs and charitable homelessness organisations in the form, for example, of outreach work with schools and youth organisations and legal support for benefit claimants and households threatened with eviction. The extent and intensity of this work being constrained by organisation finances and the availability of appropri-ately trained staff. In recent times prevention has taken on a more prominent role as evidenced in research publications (Fitzpatrick *et al*, 2021; Mackie *et al*, 2017; Oudshoorn *et al*, 2020) and the inclusion of prevention planning in regional and national homelessness strategy development. The few discussions (barely more than a page in each case) of prevention in the *Handbook* mostly occur in the country profile chapters: Australia (Chapter 24), Canada (Chapter 25), Germany (Chapter29) and the UK (Chapter 38); additionally prevention warrants a separate section in the

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[13] For example, the Third National Homelessness Plan in Finland, 2016-19 is almost entirely concerned with prevention. It is only mentioned in outline in one paragraph in the chapter on Finland (Chapter 28).

discussion of homelessness and social work in the EU (Chapter 8). Each of these demonstrates the increasing realisation – in the face of the 'failure' of housing-led programmes on their own to significantly tackle the level of homelessness – of the vital and critical role prevention plays, reinforcing the embedded truth in the undoubtedly overwork metaphor: 'while housing led programmes are disruptive of the revolving door of homelessness, prevention curtails the conveyor belt'.

Central to achieving these 'disruptive' and 'curtailment' objectives is a housing market [14] which at the very least needs to be responsive to the demand for low cost social housing and a properly regulated private rented sector. The constitution and operation of the housing market determines the social, political and economic context in which homelessness intensifies or abates. As intimated previously, evidence from virtually all the countries covered in the *Handbook* clearly shows that the main barrier to housing homeless people is ultimately the scarcity of permanent affordable housing. This is manifest in different ways from country to country: For instance, in the UK and some other European states, responsible authorities unable to meet their statutory duty of care to provide permanent housing for homeless people from their own housing stock, are increasingly reliant on hotels and an exploitative private rental sector for temporary, move-on accommodation (Nowicki, 2023), [15] while in the USA the shortage of permanent affordable accommodation is signalled by crowded shelters (Kerman et al, 2023) and burgeoning 'tent cities / homeless encampments' (Mitchell, 2020); and in Japan [16] (Hayashi, 2013) demeaning 'cyber homelessness' associated with '[inter]net and manga cafes' clearly exhibits similar problems. [17]

Caution regarding hubris is further emphasised in Pleace and Bretherton's concluding chapter (41) where they draw attention to the challenges and threats presented by 'neo-reactionism' – elsewhere known as 'The Dark Enlightenment' (Land, 2022) – to the prevailing zeitgeist regarding the causes and solutions of

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[14] The plural, 'markets**'**, is probably better. Even within the relatively limited geographic coverage of this *Handbook* at least three types of housing market can be identified – welfare, neo-liberal and command – all operating under often shared but sometimes divergent imperatives.

[15] There is of course an irony here in that the concept and reality of 'move-on' and temporary housing is suggestive of the discredited 'staircase' sequence of housing-ready programmes.

[16] Curiously not mentioned in the Japan chapter (No 33).

[17] At the time of writing (April 2025) in a wholly unprecedented innovative move Edinburgh city councillors have approved the suspension of normal council housing letting policy to hypothecate, over a limited period, all available council property for people experiencing homelessness. In the last twelve months Edinburgh City Council has breached its statutory duty to provide accommodation on 3 263 occasions, a rise of 115% over the previous year. https://homelessnetwork.scot/2025/04/28/response-to-edinburgh-suspension-of-council-housing-letting-policy/ [Accessed April 2025]

homelessness. [18] A version of neo-reactionism is currently being broadcast by the Trump regime in the USA and has purchase in some European countries particularly Hungary (Chapter 30) and has a public presence in, for example, Germany and the UK. [19] Pleace and Bretherton characterise neo-reactionism as 'an extremist, individualist, libertarian belief system' that espouses the 'total deregulation of markets… the removal or near removal of government' and 'the end to any sort of provision of public services including health, welfare and housing' (p. 437). Adopting this 'belief system' the Trump government is dismissive of housing-first and espouses a 'treatment-led approach' which translates into checking homeless people for mental health and addiction problems, thereby reinstating a crudely individualistic version of homelessness causation. The dismantling of the federal 'Interagency Council on Homelessness', one of Trump's first attacks on federal oversight of homelessness, has been followed by declarations of intent to remove all homeless people from the streets of American cities into (internment?) encampments. [20] These and comparable programmes for other spheres of public policy are integral to Project 2025, Trump's presidential transition programme compiled by the right wing Heritage Foundation set up during Reagan's presidency. The Heritage Foundation is but one of several right-wing think tanks dismissive of housing-first and championing the disbanding of government oversight of homelessness. [21]

With these issues in mind Pleace and Bretherton in the final paragraph of their *Handbook* diligently capture the provocations that presently confront homelessness, it is worth quoting in full:

> *Ultimately, this is the challenge for homelessness research [and praxis] to move away from distorted definitions and explanations and to address the forces that are reinforcing those narratives of individual pathology… centred on the alt-right and other far right movements. Recognition of the true nature and extent of homelessness is fundamental to this, that homelessness is an experience of women, children young people, migrant and ethnic minority populations, that it is an LGBTQI+ inequalities issue and that it does not exist in a single, narrow form, but is shaped by the culture, politics and welfare systems as well as by housing markets in individual cities, regions and countries.* (p.441)

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[18] See also Pleace (2021)

[19] The recently formed Great Britain PAC (Policy Action Committee) – which is closely linked with the Reform Party, though it claims links to a wider political base – is drawing up a schedule of 'action' plans for the UK 2029 general election (Shone, 2025); compare Trump's Project 2025.

[20] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-homelessness-response-forced-treatment/ [Accessed April 2025]

[21] e.g. Cicero Institute: https://cicerogroup.com/homelessness/ & Manhattan Institute https://manhattan.institute/book/homelessness-in-america [Accessed May 2025]

Epistemic Provocations

In their final chapter, 'Homelessness Futures' the editors of the *Handbook* briefly reflect on Michele Lancione's work, suggesting that he has 'challenged many of the established, narratives, ideas and conventions of existing homelessness research' (p.440). Lancione's very first sentence in *Liberatory Politics* confirms that assessment:

> *What if the solution to* **homelessness** *is not* **home***? What if home is not worth going back to, and one instead needs the construction of a more radical beyond? What kind of epistemic and material liberation is needed for thinking and doing that?* (p. vii)

Liberatory Politics is indeed a provocative and thoughtful book though – for this reviewer at least – also intermittently enigmatic. Lancione is an 'academic activist'. His impressive knowledge of the literature is firmly grounded in his familiarity with the realities of housing precarity acquired through his own ethnographic research and extensive political activity among homeless people in Italy and Romania. He is generous in his acknowledgement of his precursors (pp. 10-11) [22] and generally respectful of those he disagrees with – and he has many disagreements. Two are of particular relevance to this review. [23]

Lancione is no fan of housing-first. Or rather, while he sees housing-first as an improvement on housing-ready programmes, he still has consequential reservations. Lancione is also critical of what has been labelled the 'homelessness industry' (among which he explicitly identifies Feantsa and the European Observatory on Homelessness) for what these and other research and service organisations currently represent. [24]

In a typically revealing passage Lancione admits that initially he was supportive of housing-first, for example in producing a policy review for Shelter, one of the main homeless charities in the UK, and in celebrating housing-first's success in Finland in the company of the Y-Foundation, the agency largely responsible for implementing the programme. He is still of the opinion that it is 'a great improvement on any conditional model of sheltering' because it 'allows clients to extract something

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[22] Additionally Lancione acknowledges the influence of 'radical grassroots organising', of 'queer thinking' and of 'feminist Black organising' (p.196 & *inter alia*).

[23] *Liberatory Politics* is an extraordinary book replete with challenging argument and insight, regretfully too many to be considered in this already overlong review. Lancione also fashions and employs a new 'grammar of homelessness' the vocabulary of which "inhabitation", "lessness", "ritornello" for example need to be comprehended for a full appreciation of his exegesis. And familiarity with the work of Deleuze and Guattari would undoubtedly be useful.

[24] For example, see the section ironically (?) labelled 'Loving the Poor' (pp 102-106). Full disclosure, I was a member and co-coordinator of the European Observatory, 1998-2008

substantive from the system… the benefit of stable abode and all that means in terms of personal security' (pp. 159 & 161). Initially, Lancione questioned housing-first on the pragmatic grounds of the managerial and structural impediments to implementing a programme designed in the USA in the very different social and political context of Europe; impediments which are for him still manifest when the strictures of fidelity to the original housing-first model are relaxed. Latterly, Lancione's view of housing-first has become more censorious. His critique is based on the conviction that to understand homelessness and other issues of housing precarity attention must 'look beyond the narrow domains of housing, homeless-ness or shelter to embrace wider material and cultural structures of power'.[25] From this perspective home and home(lessness),[26] traditionally seen as binary, are conceptually refashioned as mutually constitutive, embedded in a shared precarity. Housing-first may be an advance on housing-ready but 'being housed' comes with exposure to the vagaries of misogynist, racialised, classist and increasingly finan-cialised housing markets that are fraught with difficulty and threat (or as Lancione often prefers 'violence') of disruption through domestic abuse, or eviction by rapacious landlords, mortgage default and gentrification: in these circumstances, as Lancione characterises it, 'home' contains the possibility of 'not being at home'; 'a house' is not a solution to 'homelessness' (passim).

Conversely, while the precarity of home(lessness) is all too evident – as for example detailed in the ethnographic stories recounted in *Liberatory Politics* – it can impart its own 'rewards' such as community solidarity, friendship and support. *Liberatory Politics* is here a little light on concrete examples,[27] historical or contemporary, but Lancione insists that throughout the book he 'draws from the experiences of housing movements round the globe to show that the fight for housing is more than a mere request for shelter' (p. 12).[28] Consistent with his methodology, Lancione references his own ethnographic narratives to illustrate the 'rewards' as well as the 'perils', the successes and as well as the travails of homeless people who, notwith-standing their precarious predicament, assert a degree of agency and control over 'home making'. This methodology is reflective also of a determination on Lancione's

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[25] Quoted from publicity for a conference on 'The epistemic tangles of urban inhabitation'. University of Sheffield March 2024.

[26] The parenthesis is Lancione's signal to readers that 'lessness' can be a shared attribute of the homed as well as those without a home.

[27] For Lancione, *Liberatory Politics* is an 'epistemological exercise', a 'proposition', not a 'dogmatic operation' (p.197); he shies away from the programmatic – though parts of Chapter 6, 'The Micropolitics of Housing Precarity', come close.

[28] There is a list (and no more) naming several social movements in a variety of geographical locations – Spain, Mexico, Chile, Eastern Europe, and USA – all 'challenging the unequal struc-tural functioning of their homes… patriarchy, racism class exploitation and deprivation of shelter' in their fight for housing justice (p 176).

part to avoid what he identifies as the tendency, 'characteristic of conventional economy', to collapse 'experience into wider social facts and molar structuring.' (p.15; see also: pp.175-7 & pp.181-2)

In seeking to establish the ethos of a 'liberatory politics of home' Lancione references the work of John Turner and Martin Heidegger. Turner, an anarchist academic and architect active from the 1960s through the 1980s, was a prominent proponent of self-help housing and dweller control.[29] The title of his most well-known work *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in the Built Environment* (1976) reflecting and encapsulating these principles. Turner worked, alongside a local architect Eduardo Neira and others, in the rural villages and urban informal settlements in Peru and Chile. His ideas were co-opted by the World Bank in its 'site and service' schemes. Indeed the World Bank today continues to espouse self-help housing (though not so much dweller control) in developing countries. For Lancione it is the 'anarchist squatting scene' in Europe and elsewhere which reflects and enacts these Turneresque concepts: 'Squatters have embraced the idea that inhabitation [i.e. dwelling, as verb] should be defined by the ones doing it… if we are serious about instituting a ground for a space beyond home(lessness)… what counts is… its self-determining embodiment and sense of direction' (p. 217).[30]

Lancione justifies his engagement with 'the problematic thinker' Heidegger[31] on the grounds that he, Heidegger, is one of the few philosophers to have 'thought explicitly on dwelling' (p 180). It is Heidegger's notion of 'building as dwelling' (Heidegger, 1951) which specifically captures Lancione's interest. In elaborating the connection between 'building' (a material artifact) and dwelling' (inhabiting) Lancione is at his most metaphysical (following Heidegger) and somewhat difficult to interpret, but simplifying, hopefully not to the point of distortion: a building is more (or can be more) than a simple construction; as 'dwelling' it is a potential place of personal development, social connection and environmental harmony, 'a place /space for cherishing, protecting and caring' (p. 180). The implication here is that a progressive

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[29] Michele Lancione's own anarchist proclivities are overt; he hosts a blog 'Tag: Anarchism'. https://www.michelelancione.eu/blog/tag/anarchism/ [Accessed May 2025]

[30] See Harris (2003) for an evaluative overview of Turner's work. Burgess (1978) is more critical.

[31] In 1933 on being appointed Rector of Freiburg University Heidegger joined the Nazi Party. Heidegger never renounced his party membership or challenged accusations of antisemitism. Heidegger's philosophical work is widely cited and discussed by many academics and other authors without reference to his political / antisemitic views.

reading of Heidegger's 'building as dwelling' is most likely conceived in circumstances where the 'liberatory politics' – which includes the 'material' as well as the 'epistemic'- of self-help and dweller control prevail.[32]

Lancione's critique of the 'homelessness industry'[33] – by which he means that 'broad spectrum of professionals and their institutions [social sciences and social services] working around homelessness' (p.11) – derives from his reformulation of home/home(lessness) as a unitary concept. The homeless industries are, Lancione argues, implicit in maintaining a binary interpretation which categorises homeless people as a 'separate entity' to be 'examined', 'segmented' and ''measured' by academics and other researchers, while the service sector is engaged in a management exercise controlling 'the other' according to the dictates of the prevailing political ideology. And while Lancione concedes housing-first might conceptually cut through some of this, the reality of its limited success apart from a very few notable cases, demonstrates to Lancione that housing-first is no panacea – homeless people are still marginalised and objectified as irritant to an otherwise apparently functioning society.

Clearly there is much to debate and contest. Indeed Lancione anticipates some of those objections by recreating a short 'imaginary' conversation between himself and potential critics (p.225-26). However, there is also much of value here and given the 'failure of purpose' encapsulated in the persistence and growth of homelessness across most jurisdictions and what can only be characterised as the 'wishful thinking' of ending homelessness emanating from both researchers and policy makers – Lancione definitely has a point.

Progressing through *Liberatory Politics* the question 'What is to be done?' becomes ever more pressing. Lancione tackles this in Part III and, as befits his sensibilities as an anarchist committed to 'affirmative action', proves to be more Tolstoy (1886) than Lenin (1901) – political economy perspectives (i.e. Lenin) are never overtly dismissed by Lancione but when mentioned are invariably conditioned (and thus belittled?) by the epithet 'conventional'.[34] In summary, Lancione's approach to the question of

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[32] While investigating Heidegger I came across a paper which bears an uncanny resemblance to Lancione's own work, engaging with many of the same arguments and echoing the main message of *Liberatory Politics*. A quote illustrates:

'*Specifically… I have inverted traditional reflections of homelessness: that the contemporary homeless have much to learn from the homeful. While this is certainly true, I have underscored something equally (or, more) important: that it is the homeful who have much to learn from the life of contemporary homelessness because the latter can help underline just how far the homeful perhaps are from authenticity'*. Ranasinghe (2020, p. 214)

[33]   See Robles-Durán (2023) for a recent evaluation.

[34] See pp.192-3 in *Liberatory Politics* for an eloquent summary of Lancione's radical epistemology.

'what's to be done?' involves a three-part sequential process. First, *deinstitution*: achieved through 'deinstitutionalising and fighting against the industries responsible for caring for the "other" of home, which includes much of the of the current service provision for the homeless, as well as the knowledge production around them'. Second, *reinstitution*: achieved through 'radical caring', that is, 'relearning how to care for inhabitation [i.e. dwelling as verb] and its struggles and to constitute on that basis a universal approach to housing based on dweller control'. Third, *institution*: achieved 'through affirmation' which is focused on considering occupation [i.e. squatting] and grassroots organising as an alternative to interventions focused on policy change'. (Chapters 6 & 7, summarised on p. 18)

In his response to a recent fulsome review of *Liberatory Politics* in Urban Studies (McFarlane *et al*, 2025) Lancione reacts to the observation that his book does not offer much in terms of mid-ground policy reforms by restating, in more provocative terms, the first of the above actions, *deinstitution*:

> '… *dismantling and ridiculing the business of homelessness studies and knowledge production… [R]ather than openly tackling the root causes of the problem – a home founded on racial financial heteronormative capitalism – those 'homelessness industries' produce the specialist parcellation of misery, which.… at best provides relief but surely does not offer liberation… From my situated position within the Academy, that is the big-sweep reform I would like to see: to counter the senseless production of policy recommendations based on what one might call 'scientific othering', and, from there, to* **instantiate a renewed epistemology of homing**. (Lancione, in McFarlane, 2025, p. 797)

Theoretical provocations

At the outset Don Mitchell clearly states the objective of *Mean Streets*:

> *[to bring] together in a single, sustained argument a theory of the social and economic logic behind the historic development, evolution and especially the persistence of homelessness in the contemporary city – and how that persistence is fundamentally related to the way capital works in the urban built environment, and thus to the structure, function, meaning, use and governance of urban public space* (p. vii)

This is a bold and ambitious aspiration, but one rooted in Mitchell's thirty years of researching homelessness and public space in the American city. Over seven chapters Mitchell argues that homelessness is neither the result of individual life choices or individual impediments, *nor* the consequence of structural negligence or systemic failure (though these are included in his analysis). On the contrary, for

Mitchell homelessness is 'a condition of society, not a characteristic of individuals' (p.31); it is fundamental to the operation of the capitalist mode of production.

In demonstrating the legitimacy of these claims Mitchell presents us with a materialist and provocative analysis of the interplay between urban geography, homelessness, public space and anti-homeless legislation. Central to this analysis is the Marxian concept of the 'reserve army of labour.'[35] This reserve – comprising the unemployed, the underemployed and those who are actively seeking work – coexists with the functioning economy of the employed as a constituent part of the working class.[36] The reserve army has a periodic, dual role: first, as 'a pool' of labour to be called upon in times of production expansion and, second, as a consequence of 'the pool's' availability for work, to exert downward pressure when profit is threatened by wage demands from those in employment.[37] Homelessness is an entrenched characteristic of the reserve army. However, while periodically useful to capitalism, this combination of unemployment and homelessness also throws up an incongruity particularly when the underemployed and unemployed homeless claim the streets and public spaces of urban capitalism as their dwelling place – for, as Mitchell notes, 'survival, companionship and pleasure' (p.169) – thereby potentially disrupting the 'normal' functioning of public space as a 'site' for consumption (shopping, entertainment etc) and for productive potential (investment in the built environment etc). Arguably this is the contradiction that lies at the heart of *Mean Streets*.[38]

Mean Streets has an intricate structure in which basic themes and arguments, introduced early in the text, are built upon and progressively developed historically and conceptually to unravel Michell's theory regarding the development and the persistence of homelessness in the American city. Mitchell fittingly identifies the principal issues (p xii) in each of the book's three sections. Part 1 presents a fascinating (albeit abbreviated) historical account of homelessness in the USA – tracing its roots to the birth of European capitalism and charting its growth through the 'skid rows' of the 1900s to the 'tent cities/encampments' of the 2000s. Mitchell

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[35] Otherwise referred to as 'the industrial reserve army' or 'the relative surplus population'. The similarity between Marx's 'reserve army' and Craig Willse's 'surplus population' (Willse, 2015) – the latter cited and praised by Lancione – is superficial: Marx's 'surplus' is an active and necessary component of capitalism, Willse's 'surplus', while a product of capitalism, has no equivalent 'active' role; it is akin to Wacquant's 'Outcasts' (2008).

[36] Though not explicitly referenced in *Mean Streets*, a further category, the lumpenproletariat, is sometimes included in the reserve army. In Marxist theory, the lumpenproletariat consists of people who are marginalized and often excluded from employment surviving through informal forms of subsistence (e.g. begging) that don't directly contribute to the capitalist economy. Given the ostensible overlap between the lumpenproletariat and some categories of homelessness its absence from *Mean Streets* is surprisingly unexplained.

[37] For a recent example of this process at work see: Prendergast (2020)

[38] Capitalism is of course rife with contradictions: see e.g. Harvey (2014)

argues that this historical knowledge is 'vital for understanding the present moment… through it we begin to draw a complete and especially a logical picture of the relationship… between the structural nature of homelessness and the problematic necessity of public space'. (p. xi)

A theoretical exegesis on the changed and changing patterns of circulation and accumulation of capital in the built environment follows Part 1. In this 'Interlude' (a stand-alone unnumbered chapter placed in the middle of the book) Mitchell, citing the work of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey among others, introduces concepts such as 'abstract space' and 'compound interest' in charting the shift from capitalism's 'industrial' focus in the time of Marx to the 'urban' context of late capitalism where speculation and investment in the 'built environment' operates alongside 'the factory' in producing value. Mitchell also uses this 'Interlude' chapter to mark the transition in his book from a focus on homelessness per se to a focus on public space and its increasing regulation – suggesting that open space has in effect become a misnomer; today it's less about 'openness' than about 'social control'.

Part 2 focuses explicitly on the interrelationship between homelessness and public space. Through a scripting of the increasing regulation and control of public space by law, Mitchell here proffers the concept of 'metastasising' – how in the USA anti-homeless and related ordinances have spread (cancer-like) from city to city, creating a hostile urban environment not only for homeless people but for a wider population. Until recently this might have been seen as one of Mitchell's the more debatable assertions but Donald Trump's infliction of 'ICE' (USA's Immigration and Custom Enforcement Agency) and 'Doge' (Department of Government Efficiency) on the people of the USA has changed all that.

Mean Streets – as Mitchell fully acknowledges – delivers a pessimistic message. Echoing Friederic Engels (1872) Mitchell asserts that 'capitalism has no solution to homelessness but to push it around and change its form… if we want to abolish homelessness, we must abolish capitalism'. (p. 160) This inability to 'solve' the problem of homelessness illustrates the 'limits to capitalism' referred to in the title of the book.

Yet, as his autobiographical notes (*Afterward*, pp. 157– 62) suggest, there is something of Gramsci's '*pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will*' about Mitchell's own views of the present and future. As a young man growing up in the USA in close proximity to burgeoning homelessness in west coast cities, Mitchell was at first puzzled then enraged – to the extent that he has spent a considerable part of his academic life studying the subject. The puzzlement has long since disappeared, but the rage has not abated – he is 'still angry after all these years'. And

fuelled by that anger he continues to research and write and campaign. [39] Yet Mitchell is no absolutist. Capitalism may be the problem, but along with Lancione, Mitchell is forthright in acknowledging that the deprivations of homelessness can and have been alleviated – housing-first has been beneficial for individuals and he specifically recognises the substantial improvement in the housing of previously homeless US veterans (p.28 & 150).

The end of homelessness?

In the light of the preceding reviews, the 'zeitgeist' as outlined at the beginning of this essay is looking a bit frazzled, but just about holding its own. Certainly for those of a 'liberal' persuasion, namely contributors to the *Handbook,* [40] there appears to be general acceptance of the causation narrative and housing-led paradigm. The 'anarchist' (Lancione) and 'marxist' (Mitchell) viewpoints are more antithetical specifically with regard to the long term efficacy of the housing-led approach. While both Lancione and Mitchell concede that housing-led is an advance on housing-ready they are convinced that housing-led does not deserve approbation as the route to ending homelessness.

Ending homeless strategies and programmes, national and city based, have a 20+ year history. Some have claimed success particularly in reducing rough sleeping (though frequently only temporarily) and with targeted groups such as veterans in the USA, but none – with the possible exception of Finland – have come close (even when employing the 'deception' of functional zero) [41] to eliminating homelessness across the board. Finland however has undoubtedly achieved amazing success and homelessness continues to decline.

The lessons from Finland, whose achievements are as exceptional as they are extraordinary, identify the range of issues and the level of coordination that is required for a successful assault on homelessness: the administrative and policy alignment of central government, local government and a national homelessness implementing agency (the Y foundation) to a housing-led/housing-first programme; the garnering of political will and public support; a pre-existing advanced social welfare system; and the commitment of significant and sufficient capital (monetary and political) for the provision of non-profit affordable social housing and the

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[39] See for example: https://www.liberationschool.org/homelessness-public-space-and-the-limits-to-capital-an-interview-with-don-mitchell/ [Accessed May 2025]

[40] Assigning one label 'Liberal' to 45 authors is a bit of a 'liberty' – apologies for any unintended offence.

[41] See: Hartman, P. (2015) 'The "Functional Zero" Fallacy'. Housing the Homeless https://housethehomeless.org/the-functional-zero-fallacy/ [Accessed June 2025]. See also Grainger (2024)

delivery of supporting services. It also helps that in a relatively large country (by land area 7ᵗʰ in Europe) Finland has a small population of 5.6 million, 30 percent of whom live in the relatively confined geographic space of the Helsinki metropolitan area. This 'fortuitous' combination of circumstances contrasts with Finland's neighbour, Denmark – also a country with a small population and advanced welfare provision but where attempts at ending homelessness have been less successful. [42] Lars Benjaminsen (author of the chapter on Denmark in the *Handbook*) records that – while individual homeless people and families have benefited – over the two phases of an ending homelessness programme neither the overall target of reducing homelessness, nor the specific targets of reducing rough sleeping and the closure of long-term shelters have been met. Benjaminsen identifies several factors which explain these shortfalls ranging from problems in administrative coordination with and between central government and those municipalities that chose to engage with the programme, to a critical lack of affordable housing plus difficulties in providing sufficient intensive social support services (Benjaminson, p.304 in Bretherton & Pleace, 2023).

While celebration of Finland's achievements are entirely appropriate some admonitory observations are in order. Saija Turunen and Riitta Granfelt in their *Handbook* chapter on Finland suggest that there is work still to be done before an end of homelessness accolade can be awarded. They note for example that the inclusion of at-risk women as an established part of housing services is 'still a work in progress' and that high level substance users are still 'living on the margins'. They further observe that '[m]arket-driven competitive tendering has resulted in situations where support services have been implemented with limited resources and have proved insufficient to secure housing for everyone in need.' (Turunen and Granfelt, p.314 in Bretherton and Pleace, 2023)

For the most part elegantly written and full of humanity, end of homelessness proposals are enthusiastic, ambitious and appealing – yet lacking in evidence – indeed such evidence as there is suggests that all such plans, particularly when completion dates are added, fall well short of stated expectations. For example, in 2010 the US Interagency Council on Homelessness identified several ambitious objectives: ending veteran homelessness by 2015, ending chronic homelessness by 2017 and family homelessness by 2020. With the investment of significant resources progress was made in all these objectives – particularly on veteran homelessness – but 'ending' was not one of them. In 2021 the EU's Lisbon Declaration established the 'European Platform for Combatting Homelessness' (EPOCH) with the declared intention of ending rough sleeping, preventing discharge into homelessness, curtailing evictions and ending discrimination by 2030. With

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[42] See Allen *et al* (2010) for further detail.

only 5 years to go the evidence again clearly suggests that these targets will not be met, indeed homeless continues to increase in virtually all member states (See Footnote 3).

In seeking an explanation for the failure to curb the recurrence and persistence of homelessness let alone 'end it', the lack of sufficient affordable and secure permanent housing stands out as the fundamental impediment – on this the authors of the three books reviewed in this essay seem to agree. A disappointment of the *Handbook* is that while this issue is frequently intimated it is not addressed directly in relation to how this 'shortage' is to be resolved other than with passing references to 'the need' for rent controls, municipal and non-profit housing. The *Handbook*, as noted earlier, conspicuously provides no critique of the paramountcy of commodified /for-profit housing markets that control and inhibit the process of housing production. Lancione and Mitchell have important differences with each other, but both argue that under the prevailing forms of economic and social regulation there is no resolution to homelessness. They might agree that de-commodification of the housing market is essential but only truly liberating when embedded in wider battle against precarity, misogyny, racism and stigma. In this context Mitchell's observations are instructive:

> Holding to the principle that '*to abolish homelessness we need to abolish capitalism*' does not mean *'that all manner of interventions into homelessness – creating shelter, defining encampments, providing real, needed psychological support, abolishing the prison system – are not necessary… [r]ather it means imagining and working towards a world of abundance in which the general law of capital accumulation simply does not operate'.* (p.160)

Managing and mitigating homeless may not be enough, but in the meantime…

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