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## A review of "Homeless lives in American cities: interrogating myth and locating community", By Philip Webb

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**Homeless Lives in American Cities: Interrogating Myth and Locating Community**, By Philip Webb, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, ISBN 9781137374226

Webb offers a 'new history' of homelessness in America. Those tempted by the popular references to Billy Joel lyrics and the first Rambo film in the book's opening pages should not be misled. This is a forensic account of how the idea of homelessness emerged and evolved in the USA from the 1890s to the present day over. It draws on a mix of social and cultural theory, social commentary from journalists and activists, literature and 'myth' to describe discourses on homelessness; the underpinnings or origins of those discourses; and the impact these shifting constructions of homelessness have had on how the men (and much later, women and families) considered to be homeless are managed by institutions that evolved to respond to this largely urban social problem.

The book is dense with detail of key moments in this history of homelessness. Webb charts of the shift in the early twentieth century from *cities* being described as 'homelessness' - that is, overtaken by city-slums unable to accommodate the bourgeois Christian family home and the values it represents - to disaffiliated single men being identified as homeless and becoming the locus of social anxieties about threats to the family. These threats are understood as partly rooted in (anti-Semitic) 'mythic tropes' - those of Cain, Ishmael, the Wandering Jew and (later) Rachel weeping for her children. These tropes ultimately 'win out' over more positive characterisations of 'the hobo' as "a self-defined, independent man" (p. 113) with his own associational life, sense of freedom, "wandering spirit" (p. 123) and 'social moorings' (including hobo-unions); what Webb describes as 'hobosociality' (chapter 4). Webb argues in chapters 4 and 5 that 'shelterization' and the paternalistic impulses of the 'helping professions' form the hobo "into a homeless man who is docile and malleable to the shelter's governance" (p. 109).

Chapter 7 describes how social change in the 1980s forced a fracturing of the idea of the single disaffiliated man as 'homeless', with social services and social scientists forced to abandon the gendered and racialised assumptions of the homelessness discourse and acknowledge the existence of the homeless family - "No longer was the homeless figure exclusively the (White) man of Skid Row" (p. 189). It is this fracturing of the consensus on homelessness, and the tensions inherent within it (in what sense are homeless *families* disaffiliated?) that lead Webb to argue that "the term *homeless* must go, and... a new way of talking about social displacement must replace it" (p. 178). What this new way should look like, is not a question the book appears to answer.

In the final chapters of the book, Webb considers the 'Disneyfication of the City' and argues against the 'sanitisation' of public space in line with anti-revanchist scholarship and ideas about a 'right to the city' that have emerged in response to some of these trends. Better connections with these related bodies of literature would have been welcome. Webb notes that by the 1980s and 1990s, the homeless no longer represent the threat to family and social order that they did in the early twentieth century. Sanitisation is not driven by a need to prevent violent or revolutionary political upheaval, but to ensure the "uninterrupted possibility of consumption" (p. 203).

I leave an assessment of the historical validity of Webb's analysis to social historians, though it is certainly a fascinating account that will be of interest to social scientists and housing researchers with an interest in homelessness far beyond the US context. For non-American audiences, Webb's contribution raises the question of

how similar the trajectory of understandings of homelessness has been in other national contexts.

Readers primarily interested in the policy implications to be drawn from *Homeless Lives in American Cities* should approach it with caution. Webb's focus is on "the discursive negotiations of the modern American city" and how these negotiations led to "the current constellation of policies and structures of social service programmes" (p. 7). He is concerned with "language and rhetoric and not with the changes on the street", though such changes are acknowledged to be important in that they "inflect and interact with... language" (p. 188). As such, those of a more 'realist' ontological bent – and more broadly, those primarily concerned with the material experience of homelessness and how it can be prevented and resolved – will find policy lessons and empirical insights hard to find.

That being said, Webb does engage in contemporary policy debates in chapter 9, specifically in relation to the Housing First model. Though critical engagement with current policy 'zeitgeists' is to be welcomed, Webb's analysis is far from compelling. Though he concedes that Housing First has "much to recommend it", he goes on to say that it is a "poor fix", which "[i]nstead of eliminating the conditions giving rise to homelessness... places the solution in the government's hands to shove someone into housing" (p.219). Though this appeal to address the underlying causes of homelessness will find support in many quarters, this summary indictment Housing First is surprising and insufficiently defended. First, the claim that those targeted by Housing First programmes are 'shoved' into housing appears to misunderstand – or woefully underplay – that core to the model is the provision of open ended, non-conditional, wrap around support and to forget that fast-track access to permanent housing is the 'innovation' of Housing First compared to linear staircase models that have been shown to continuously fail to offer the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness a feasible route off the streets. Second, from the perspective of evidence on the achievements of Housing First in addressing homelessness and achieving housing stability for a group often failed by 'the system', the characterisation of Housing First as "the programmatic way to begin [the] process" of "render[ing] each homeless person a cog in the political economy" (p. 221) comes across as, frankly, glib. Third, the claim that such a process is prompted by "[f]ears of the uncertain social arrangements of alternative communities" living on the streets misunderstands the origins of Housing First (Tsemberis, 2010). It also risks romanticising street homelessness - something the book as a whole comes close to at a number of points - in a way that is hard to justify when the often devastating impacts of rough sleeping on the health and wellbeing of those who experience it are taken into account.

More generally, Webb's characterisation of the emergence and aims of what he calls the 'helping professions' in terms of attempts to bring order to American cities in response to a range anxieties – in the early twentieth century threats to the family and in the late twentieth century threats to consumption – appears to me to tell (at best) only part of the story regarding the motivations and objectives of those working in homelessness and social services. Missing from the book is any attempt to draw a boundary or consider the relationship between on the one hand, socially controlling efforts to manage a population that is seen as a threat to society, and institutional and policy attempts to improve the lives of a vulnerable group of people, in relation to what might tentatively be called 'objective' criteria around their mental and physical health, housing stability and poverty.

Tsemberis, S. (2010) *Housing First: the Pathways model to end homelessness for people with mental illness and addiction* (Center City, Minnesota, Hazelden).

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