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Neutralizing Homelessness, 2015: The Story to Date

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Introduction: Thinking relationally about homelessness

Herein, I’d like to revisit Peter Marcuse’s influential essay, *Neutralizing Homelessness* (1988), to see what light his conclusions—now nearly thirty years old—can shed on the contemporary landscape of homelessness in the United States and those post-industrial nations that have followed its example (cf. von Mahs 2011). At its first publication, the public appearance of endemic homelessness in this country was still news. Still shocking enough to demand an explanation. Marcuse’s was one of several scholarly works (arguably the most piercing and prescient) to attempt one, diagnosing the political-economic sea-changes that would give rise to the ongoing crisis as we now know it (see also Wolch, Dear, and Akita 1988, Hopper 1988). It might be a testament to his insight, or an indictment of our inaction, that much of what he wrote still holds true.

“The new situation that explains the current rise in homelessness is,” Marcuse wrote at the time, “on the economic side, deindustrialization. Politically it can be attributed to the new conservatism. On the housing end, its reflection might well be labeled the gentrification/abandonment pattern,” (1988: 73). The conservatism is no longer new, but beyond that, he might just as easily have written this today. And yet each of these factors has evolved in ways that demand attention: deindustrialization begat a global regime of post-Fordist accumulation; gentrification and abandonment continue apace, giving rise to new metropolitan taxonomies of winners and losers in the global economy; and the “new” conservatism has diversified into myriad niche species within the genus “neoliberalism.” An all-too brief sketch of these developments is my ambit here, to serve as both introduction and context for the other two essays in this collection. While there are more recent, equally synoptic accounts of the evolution and underpinnings of “American style” homelessness (Mitchell 2011; cf. Glasser and Bridgman 1999, Gibson 2004), it is particularly poignant to ground our overview in a critique that is virtually as old as the emergency itself. To sound out the contemporary resonances of Marcuse’s three theses above, then, is both to contextualize and historicize that emergency, and the discussions thereof in the following essays.

Perhaps more important than his conclusions, however, was his method. The essay approaches homelessness not as a distinct phenomenon, but as a symptom of changes global and systemic. Nowhere does he try to understand why certain person lose their homes, or what sorts of outreach are best, or how to organize (or raze) an encampment. These are all pressing questions, of the sort often debated in council chambers and pored over in conferences like the one where our essays were born. But they are not questions about how to end homelessness. Indeed, as Marcuse puts it, “First and foremost, homelessness must be seen as a component, an extreme reflection, of general social, economic, and political patterns, not as an isolated problem, separate and apart,” (1988: 91; author’s emphasis).

People experiencing homelessness, of course, probably know this already. Those of you reading this who are homeless or have been, forgive me for stating the obvious. It is not obvious to everyone. Consider, for example, the position taken by Seattle’s mayor Ed Murray (endorsed by the United States Interagency
Council on Homelessness) that sanctioned homeless encampments are a wasteful “distraction” from the pursuit of long-term supportive housing (Young 2016)—while at the same time aggressively dismantling those encampments established by shelterless people trying to survive. Murray is less miserly than many more conservative mayors. But his thinking is sorely unrelational. Not only does he fail to raise preventative, system-wide interventions (limiting himself instead to inadequate, after-the-fact approaches like Housing First). He also gives no account of what will happen to shelterless people—who outnumber existing emergency shelter beds by nearly four thousand (Seattle King County Coalition on Homelessness Nd.)—if they are not allowed to camp anywhere in the city.

In contrast, Marcuse’s synoptic thinking anticipates that of the Relational Poverty Network, of which this suite of essays is a project. Where some poverty research describes tidy relationships of causation or correlation—an indispensable language for speaking to policy makers—the RPN looks for mutual axes of entanglement and overdetermination. Where some scholars have isolated an abstract category like “the homeless” (e.g. Blau 1993, Erickson and Wilhelm 1986, cited in Mitchell 2011), the RPN queries the discourses themselves that produce these taxa. Far from muddying the issue, this kind of thinking multiplies our sites of intervention. Consider Marcuse’s solution to the crisis: “Theoretically, there are three answers to the problem of homelessness, corresponding to its three causes: uncouple the housing system from the rest of the private market system and make it respond to need; change the economic system so that all have a decent living wage; or provide government subsidies to provide housing for those who cannot get it through the private market,” (1988: 73-74).

With that plural framing in mind, below I will think through some of the evolutions in each of these three realms over the last three decades.

**Homelessness, post-Fordism, and the city**

Let’s begin not with housing as Marcuse does, but with deindustrialization; through that lens, developments on the other two fronts can be made more sensible. What Marcuse was pointing out was the already visible outline of the global social and economic patterns that would be called post-Fordism. “Fordism” because it shared the mass consumption and mass production of the mid-twentieth century, exemplified by Ford’s assembly line. But “post” because the mode of manufacturing has changed. This is not only a matter of outsourcing, although the loss of many manufacturing jobs to cheaper labor forces in other countries left a definitive hole in the US economy—one not filled by the proliferation of low-waged service industries. More than that, though, as Marcuse put it, “Both the extent and the nature of unemployment and employment have changed, and so have the power relationships of employers and employees,” (1988: 76).

Marcuse was writing in 1988. He hadn’t heard of NAFTA yet, but he was already anticipating the downward harmonization effect that outsourcing would have not only on the jobs lost, but on the jobs left behind. As US workers competed with workers abroad, working conditions, wages, and collective bargaining power at home were brought more in line with the shorter-term contracts, worse working conditions, lower wages, and union-busting abroad.
As David Harvey has argued (2007), these post-Fordist shifts—and the neoliberal ideologies which underwrote them—have tended to redistribute wealth upwards from the working and middle classes. The net effect has been a national distribution of incomes reminiscent of a camel with two humps—with more precarious futures all around. This (still) growing disparity is significant for two reasons. First because it left workers at the bottom profoundly more vulnerable. And second, because it laid the groundwork for class antagonisms that fueled the “new conservatism,” which we’ll talk about momentarily. Moreover, such precarity has led to a great deal of movement, both within and between countries. This new class of migratory labor, from fishermen to farm workers, is particularly vulnerable, and at risk of homelessness.

Three decades into these transformations, their effects can often be best observed at the scale of the city. We need only think of the recent protests in Baltimore, Ferguson, and across the country, where the systematic disparities of the new economy are finding expression in not only economic oppression and segregation, but racialized and militarized policing regimes.

It’s worth examining the ways in which these transformations have affected different cities differently. Some places, like Detroit, have found themselves shell-shocked “post-American” landscapes, vacated by manufacturers and largely-white middle classes alike (Solnit 2007), while others have been well-placed to attract white-collar service industries. The sociologist Saskia Sassen calls the largest and most successful of these “global cities,” insofar as they concentrate the work of managing the global economy—corporate management, financial industries, research and development, information technology and so on (2001). Seattle, for example, has followed this pattern closely, losing much of its manufacturing (particularly its Fordist patron saint, Boeing) only to attract thousands of information technology workers and other beneficiaries of the new economy (cf. Gibson 2004). Indeed, Seattle recently experienced the second highest growth in median incomes in the country (Balk 2014b).

Sassen’s global cities also exemplify the best-of-times-worst-of-times logic of the post-Fordist economy, however, with incomes starkly polarized between white-collar and blue-collar service industries. Again, Seattle is exemplary, with a widening income gap between the top twenty percent, whose incomes rose by $15,000 to $2480,000 between 2012 and 2013, and the bottom twenty percent, whose incomes remained stagnant at a mere $13,000 (ibid.).

In contrast to Seattle’s boom, we might consider the story of a place like Stockton, California, which made headlines in the wake of the 2008 housing crisis for its record foreclosures, with one out of every ten homes repossessed at the height of the crisis (Nieves 2010) and its descent into bankruptcy (City of Stockton 2012). But the crisis only compounded the bleak prospects of those residents earning meager wages and precarious futures in its agricultural and service industries—staffed largely by migrants, people of color, and (to add a note of historical irony) the precarious white children and grandchildren of an earlier generation of economic refugees from the Dust Bowl.

These vignettes are, of course, only three of the myriad ways in which cities have succeeded or succumbed within the post-Fordist landscape. But the contrast also illustrates what cities across the US have in common. Although deindustrialization has affected cities across the US differently, it has not affected them separately. Tied to the same sea-changes in the national and global economies, the stakes for these cities are parallel. Some of us may remember, for example, Seattle City Attorney Mark Sidran’s editorial threat in the early 1990s that Seattle needed to act quickly to insulate upstanding consumers from
the blight of panhandlers and public eye-sores, lest the shoppers abandon the city and Seattle become one of the country’s “formerly great places to live,” (Sidran 1993). Sidran was explicitly identifying Seattle’s potential futures with deindustrialized cities like Detroit (cf. Gibson 2004). And that threat was instrumental in passing a range of “civility” ordinances which criminalized things like sitting on the sidewalk during business hours. (We’ll return to those in a moment.)

**Gentrification, foreclosure, and manufactured scarcity**

With such an emerging portrait of the diverse dimensions and shared stakes of the post-industrial American metropolis, we can begin to discuss how the new economic landscape remakes relationships not only between cities but within them. And in particular, we can imagine the relationships between incomes, expenses, and the cultural economies of the city.

In 1988, Marcuse highlighted the role of gentrification, and the related phenomenon of warehousing—leaving properties vacant to speculate on rising rents. And of course, these phenomena are no less part of the contemporary landscape. Indeed, Sassen points out that high-income gentrification is part and parcel of competing as a “global” city, where white collar labor is valorized while blue collar labor and the working classes, migrants, and people of color who do it are sociospatially marginalized (2001). As a result, cities like Seattle, San Francisco, or New York City are some of the most expensive in the country. Seattle, for example, saw the steepest increase in housing costs across the United States in 2013 (Balk 2014a). And, of course, this directly exacerbates the struggle for shelter: one study, for example, found that an increase of $100 in a region’s Fair Market Rents corresponded to a growth of fifteen percent in its shelterless population (Byrne et al 2012: 620).

Marcuse also highlights the role of government in promoting this sort of gentrification. We need only look at the public subsidies thrown at new developments in Seattle’s Downtown Core or South Lake Union neighborhood, for example, to find city government actively courting high-income earners and property values (cf. Gibson 2004, Seattle Displacement Coalition, Nd.).

Free market enthusiasts often claim new housing developments will deflate these bubbles, however the law of supply and demand is honored more in word than in deed. Ironically, the soaring cost of housing in these cities often coincides with a surprisingly high vacancy rate. Activist group Picture the Homeless, for example, counted enough vacant buildings and lots to accommodate New York City’s entire homeless population five times over (2012). According to sociologists Logan and Molotch, real estate markets in such booming cities are often under the influence of what they call “growth machines,” complex systems of urban elites, businesses, and policy makers that reinforce and amplify each other’s incentives for further development (Logan and Molotch 1987). In these growth machines, according to Logan and Molotch, not only does it often seem profitable to keep on developing new real estate projects beyond the city’s immediate need for them, but paradoxically, the growing supply can inflate the cost of housing (contra the law of supply and demand) as the new developments represent not only quantitative but changes in the real estate market, either by remaking the commodity's use value (replacing single room occupancy hotels with more expensive condominiums, for example, or altering the property’s zoning restrictions) or exchange value (transforming the desirability and cultural capital of a place).
Oddly enough, then (to return to our comparison with Stockton), both growth and recession can displace people from homes. If these two different scenarios seem hard to reconcile, it is worth remembering that manufactured scarcity is not aberrant, but rather is often the very precondition of market exchange. By one measure, after all, there are almost twenty-four empty homes in the United States for every American experiencing homelessness.¹

Citizenship, entitlement, and criminalization of poverty

The third of Marcuse’s three factors, what he called the “new conservativism,” is old by now. However its evolution has been rich and prolific. It would come to be identified within the broad rubric of neoliberalism, with all its diverse free-market fundamentalisms. Marcuse highlights, of course, deep cuts to the safety net—particularly in terms of income supports and low-income housing subsidies (which have been transmuted to tax breaks for home owners with nary an ironic wink)—in the name of fiscal responsibility, business incentives, or the disciplining of labor markets. And, to be sure, these go on. Nancy Fraser describes the key impacts of neoliberal restructuring in the United States, particularly the bipartisan “welfare reforms” of the 1990s, that worked to both “to worsen the economic situation of poor women and children,” and “to send a clear message that the only socially valuable work was waged work,” (Fraser and Bedford 2008: 227)—resuscitating the Victorian-era distinction between deserving and undeserving poor.

One of the key arms of this new conservativism, therefore, worked at the level of an attack on the very notion of entitlement (to food, shelter, cash assistance, and so on). A parallel development partly anticipated by Marcuse, is the growth of charitable nonprofit endeavors to fill the spaces left behind by those lost entitlements. With great foresight, Marcuse observed that these charitable projects, often run with volunteer labor rather than state funding, were depoliticizing poverty. He wrote, “The charitable tradition leads to a narrow view of homelessness... Such church groups are an important and frequently effective voice for specific programs but do not question the housing system as a whole,” (1988: 82).

To wit, as Marcuse was writing in the 1980s, food banks, soup kitchens, and other emergency food programs were recent innovations, imagined, like shelters, to respond temporarily to a passing economic crisis (Mitchell 2011). But by 1998, when the crisis had passed and the emergency food programs remained, sociologist Janet Poppendieck was able to remark on their large-scale acceptance and naturalization as having undermined the entitlements of citizenship (1998). Why, she asks aloud, did the United States naturalize voluntary charity to deal with such emergencies, rather than reaffirm the right to eat? The net effect, in the present day is that the volunteer labor that staffs emergency food programs amounts to an outsourced “third tier” of the shrinking welfare state (Dickinson 2014) or a "shadow state" (Mitchell 2011).

¹ In the United States, there were approximately 13,791,000 units of housing vacant year-round in 2014 (Callis and Kresin 2015). Compare that to the 578,424 people estimated to experience homelessness on any given night during the same year, quite possibly a conservative estimate (National Alliance to End Homelessness Nd.), and you arrive at almost twenty-four empty homes for everyone homeless.
In the last three decades this new conservatism has also evolved, in the urban context, into a range of “quality of life” or "civility" laws, such as Mark Sidran’s anti-sitting law, that prioritize the comfort and order experienced by white and middle class residents (lest they flee for the suburbs, as in Detroit). Inspired by the hotly contested “broken windows” theory of policing—which suggests that minor symbolic disorder, rather than inequality and structural violence represent a slippery slope that leads to crime—many such laws criminalized everyday necessities for homeless citizens like panhandling, sitting, sleeping, and excreting (Mitchell 1997, Vitale 2008). Recent research by Seattle University counted over 288 new such city laws passed since 2000 in Washington State alone (Olson, MacDonald, and Rankin 2015).

These ordinances affect not only homeless denizens, but a range of working class, minority, and immigrant constituencies, all of whom have disproportionately borne the brunt of deindustrialization. Extrajudicial spatial exclusion orders, for example, used in many cities ostensibly to deter petty drug offenses and other instances of disorder, were disproportionately and often indiscriminately used to banish poor people and people of color from public spaces (Beckett and Herbert 2010). Neil Smith identified such laws with a pattern of “revanchism” ("revanche" is French for “revenge”) on behalf of white and middle class residents who resented the presence of the working classes and people of color in the city (Smith 1996).

One most recent manifestation of this pattern has been to prohibit public food sharing (National Coalition for the Homeless 2014). Seattle, for example, permits outdoor food sharing in only a single location—under the freeway, a stiff uphill walk from several shelters, and well away from downtown foot traffic. Such prohibitions clearly illustrate the entanglement between cities' post-industrial economic stakes and an assertion of middle- and upper-income control over the fortunes of the city. Describing the decision-making that established Seattle’s single permitted outdoor meal program, for example, one local advocate I spoke in the course of my own research described to me suggesting to a city councilmember that the outdoor meal site represented an opportunity for expansion—to include a range of indoor-outdoor services and projects for social justice. According to the advocate, the city councilmember responded by saying “over my dead body… that’s not my constituency.”

Conclusions

Such prejudices and priorities, of course, aren't merely reactionary after-thoughts about the problem of homelessness. They further compound the problem itself—the Seattle University study I mentioned a moment ago also found that antihomeless laws actually cost taxpayers millions of dollars more than simply helping people (see also Herbert and Beckett 2010, Blomley 2009: 583). As such they remind us that every facet of the three factors outlined above is intimately entangled with the others. The postindustrial economic stakes of a city are closely tied to the spending priorities and class antagonisms of its municipal ordinances. Dwindling affordable housing is tied to income inequality. The proliferation of charitable volunteer projects is implicated in the erosion of public entitlements. And so on.

The take home point I would like to end on, then, is that, as Marcuse reminds us, homeless advocates cannot be single-issue activists. Homelessness mustn’t be depoliticized or divorced from the range of
systematic factors that produce it. As he puts it, “Building temporary shelters is no solution to a permanent, structural problem,” (92).

We must think of education policy as homelessness policy. Zoning policy as homelessness policy. Food policy as homelessness policy. Parking enforcement policy as homelessness policy. In other words, we need to think relationally. Again, of course, anyone reading this who has ever been homeless knows only too well how interconnected these issues are. It remains then for the rest of us to prick up our ears.

Bibliography


