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Move It Along: The Social-Spatial Imaginaries of Urban Spaces and the Exclusion of Homeless Populations

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**Move It Along:
The Social-Spatial Imaginaries of Urban Spaces and the Exclusion of
Homeless Populations**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

by

Devin B. Griffin

Thesis Advisors:
Lisa Brawley
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Introduction

“And we pass this homeless guy, and she sees him – I mean, we all passed him, but she saw him. She’s the only who actually *saw* him. We didn’t – me and her cousin – were like, uh so, he’s supposed to be there, so what... She goes “oh my God, sir, are you okay? What *happened?*”

What *happened?* *America* happened, that’s what happened... We start correcting *her* behavior, like she’s doing something wrong. She’s like, “why, is he okay?” No, no, he needs you desperately, that’s not the point. We just... don’t do that here.”¹

The crowd laughs as comedian Louis C.K. finishes his joke, ending an early episode of his eponymous sitcom, *Louie*. Throughout the bit, Louis mockingly points out that the homeless man is covered in garbage, smells like urine, and is ultimately someone he has not the least interest in helping; he makes no effort to disguise the disgust that he feels for the man, even going so far as physically indicate how far away from him he wants to stand. Yet, like much of Louis’ comedy, the joke always subtly ends up on him. He somehow knows that his insensitivity towards the plight of this person makes him a worse human being than his friend’s innocent cousin, the secret heroine of this little vignette. His ridicule of the homeless man is not meant to dehumanize the bum, but rather the comedian himself. Though he makes elaborate urine jokes about this person, Louis is truly ridiculing a society that walks down the street and actively ignores a man in desperate need of assistance just because “we don’t do that here.”

This joke illustrates one of the fundamental points of this paper, that the majority of society constructs and perpetuates an image of the homeless individual as disgusting, unkempt, and unworthy of assistance or respect. Louis C.K. is communicating to the audience his conformity to that oppressive social norm while simultaneously pointing out its absurdity. Privileged with our

¹ *Louie*. Episode no. 3, first broadcast 6 July 2010 by FX. Directed by Louis C.K. and written by Louis C.K.

accessibility to private space and relative freedom to wander through public and pseudo-public spaces unrestrained, the dominant housed population has the power to ignore those who go without such advantages. We attach meanings to the idea of homelessness, often based on historic conceptions of the condition, that invalidate the reality of that lived experience in the contemporary world. Conditioned to spot homeless people by their appearance and behavior, we learn to avoid them; conversely, we can become so accustomed to the sight of them that we render them virtually invisible. Either way, we firmly establish their collective identity as Other in a shockingly open and unapologetic way.

Having constructed this property-dependent identity binary between “them” and “us,” the housed inevitably feel tension between themselves and the homeless within the physical arenas of public spaces. Somehow the housed convince themselves that they have the ultimate privilege to this space, that the homeless, through their lack of property and “proper socialization,” have no claim to its use. There is a constant exaggeration of the differences between these social groups in order to justify the dominance of one over the other. Thus begins a struggle wherein the housed seek to push out the destitute as the destitute seek to find a space for survival. Putting this issue of contested space into perspective, Talmadge Wright observes, “Homeless persons, like all persons, exist, move, thrive, and die within urban, suburban, and rural spaces, acting and reacting to imposed practices that seek to regulate their bodies.”² Unlike the housed, however, the homeless have a limited range of accessible space within which they can move; their survival is based in part on what open, public spaces they can utilize. Increasingly, though, urban governances restrict and remove the rights of the homeless to access these spaces.

The sense that the homeless are “out of place” in spaces such as parks, shopping centers, and restaurants is only reinforced by an increasingly neoliberal definition of citizenship wherein

² Wright, Talmadge. *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 39.

capital potential is valued over civic participation. By conceptualizing the homeless as non-consumers/non-citizens, it becomes cognitively easier for state and private forces to openly act against them. Rules against the very presence of the homeless have become widespread, as well as city ordinances forbidding basic acts of survival within public spaces. Both constitutional and human rights are violated every day, often left unchallenged by the oppressed minority and (largely) apathetic majority. An obsession with order and uncontested social conformity thus creates a culture wherein surveillance and discrimination are not only accepted, but expected. With these discriminatory social attitudes legally codified and upheld, the housed thus construct social-spatial imaginaries that fundamentally exclude the homeless. Concern for fellow humans becomes subsumed by the struggle over space and the desire to maintain social dominance. They attach abstract identities to particular spaces by creating definitions of acceptable appearance, behavior, and utilization in order to maintain a distinction between themselves and the Other. “Privileged persons must act, either consciously or unconsciously, to reproduce an illusion of social order and stability that will reinforce the social imaginary that constructs their very selves as ‘privileged’ or ‘housed’ persons, if they wish to maintain their power and privileges.”³

As their access to these spaces slips away, transformed and redeveloped by private forces for the use of a privileged few, the homeless are left with an uncertain landscape of accessibility wherein the geography of survival complements and overlaps with the geography of alienation. Homeless individuals thus move through cities using institutional services such as shelters, public and quasi-public spaces like streets and parks, restricted private land, and the fragmentary spaces of uncertain functionality between them. As a means of survival, the homeless adapt to their environments by subverting the intended uses of spaces to their own needs, often violating the legal restrictions on behavior that have been put in place to exclude individuals such as themselves.

³*Ibid.*, 59.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the contemporary preeminence of neoliberal urbanism and the hypercompetitive entrepreneurial city in order to articulate how urban governance is now a negotiated partnership between public and private forces. Just as consumerism replaces citizenship as the dominant identity marker of the individual, so too does a city's need for economic boosterism become prioritized over its general social welfare. Market-driven spatial redevelopment thus leads to gentrification, often driving way individuals and families who cannot keep up with rising costs, and the construction of new social-spatial imaginaries that govern the acceptable actions and individuals permitted there. Most often in violation of these social conventions due to the necessity of public displays of "private" behavior, the homeless find themselves increasingly barred from spaces of survival.

In Chapter 2, I trace the development of contemporary social views on homelessness by examining historic notions of the condition as well as what social and economic factors have accompanied it throughout the past century. Recognizing the emergence of a "New Homeless" in the 1970s and 80s, I then consider what social demographics are often affected by homelessness and how many people that might include before engaging with both structuralist and individualist views on why it exists in our society. Finally, I map out the geography of survival by describing the different institutions and methods utilized by homeless persons to best make a life in an exclusionary urban environment.

In Chapter 3, I further address the ways in which urban governances remove or violate the rights of the homeless, as well as how they justify such discriminatory actions. Retooling the Right to the City concept as a means of protecting the rights of accessibility and respect for the homeless, I make the case that the housed unfairly neglect the humanity of the oppressed. Last, I complicate the Habermasian idea of the public sphere in order to illustrate the societal dangers of continuing these patterns of exclusion and discrimination.

In Chapter 4, I apply the argument and observations developed in Chapters 1 through 3 to a particular urban case: New York City. I briefly examine the state of homelessness over the past several decades before focusing closely on the recent history of how the city has addressed the issue. Recommending particular policy changes and implementations, I turn at last to a short discussion on the role of local organizations as a tool for public engagement and discourse of change.

I originally took on this project because I felt that homelessness does not receive the same academic and discursive interrogation as other systems of oppression. Despite my desire to confront this social injustice, however, I did not necessarily envision making a strong ethical claim. I intended to avoid a moralizing stance and instead examine how the survival strategies of the homeless affected their interactions with the housed majority. Over the course of my work, my argument has radically changed. My research, as well as conversations I continuously engaged in on the subject, showed me that the very concept of “homelessness” had to be challenged. As a society, we need to understand who these people are, what they go through in order to survive, and how we strip them of their most basic rights. I also recognized that I had to somehow argue not only for the respect of these people, but also in defense of their agency. As Margaret Kohn points out, “We need an approach to homelessness that treats the homeless as more than passive victims with a right to primal survival.”⁴ They make choices, they improvise, and they do what they need to in order to make it to the next day. Above all, though, is the need to engage with them. The more we ignore their humanity, the more we lose some of our own.

⁴ Kohn, Margaret. *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 177.

Chapter One

Neoliberalism and the Reshaping/Reimagining of Urban Space

“... in order to comprehend neoliberalism’s political and cultural effects, it must be conceived of as more than a set of free market economic policies that dismantle welfare states and privatize public services in the North, make wreckage of efforts at democratic sovereignty or economic self-direction in the South, and intensify income disparities everywhere. Certainly neoliberalism comprises these effects, but as a political rationality, it also involves a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state.”⁵

Given this understanding of neoliberalism as an ongoing, aspirational project, neoliberalism has become the paradigmatic approach to our economic system, our governance, and even our daily lives. Increasingly, free market discourse does more than affect how businesses run themselves; it also erodes the concept of citizenship, promoting consumer identities over that of democratic participant. The rise of neoliberalism as an ideological force has dramatically shifted how cities both look and feel. These changes to both urban culture and the built environment intersect in the form of socio-spatial imaginations, wherein society constructs certain identities for spaces that govern who can be there and what they can do. The politics of “appropriate” public and private behavior, governed by these social conventions, therefore impact the ways in which the homeless are viewed in particular spaces. Thus, neoliberal urbanism has not just affected the homeless in that it as a politico-economic process perpetuates the condition and works to cut services to those in need, it also has aided in the social condemnation of this oppressed group of people.

⁵ Brown, Wendy. “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization.” In *Political Theory* 34, no. 6. (2006): 693.

The classical liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides the necessary context for understanding the development of late twentieth-century neoliberalism. Liberal thinkers focused almost exclusively on the individual and “asserted that the highest virtue of a society is the degree to which its individuals are allowed to pursue pleasure.”⁶ The focus on the individual, an unfettered market, and a non-interventionist state became the core beliefs of liberal ideology. Critics like Marx and Engels condemned it as an excuse for capitalist exploitation while others, such as John Stuart Mill and John Maynard Keynes, focused on systemic reform. Becoming increasingly widespread with its successful application during the New Deal era, a new “egalitarian liberalism” managed to combine several of classical liberalism’s basic tenets with “a redistributive nation-state that would more aggressively intervene to provide some of the basic economic conditions necessary for experiencing the putative political freedoms of classical liberalism.”⁷ With this philosophy in mind, Keynesianism became very prominent amidst the policy landscape of post-war America as cities became much more concerned with issues such as public housing, welfare, and transportation infrastructure. Though by no means socialism, this philosophy justified government intervention when it faced imperfect competition, public or social goods, and externalities; it also focused on maintaining the balance between mass production and consumption through federal regulation. Unfortunately, flaws within this system and capitalism in general eventually emerged, rendering it unsustainable and eventually necessitating reform.

While the economic boom of the 1950s and 60s managed to keep New Deal policies in practice for several decades, social and economic changes during the 1970s seriously impacted the future development of cities. Deindustrialization became a ubiquitous problem for urban areas that had historically depended on the capital and jobs provided by manufacturers and other labor-

⁶ Hackworth, Jason. *The Neoliberal City: Governance, Ideology, and Development in American Urbanism*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

intensive businesses. Federal policies regarding highway construction and mortgage subsidization helped to accelerate the flight of America's white middle class out of the urban core, leaving cities with drastically reduced tax bases and businesses. At the same time, white suburbanization left increasingly higher percentages of racial minorities to fend for themselves in a weakened but still racially discriminatory urban economy. Last, the financial recession of the 1970s caused enormous reductions in federal aid and support for municipalities, forcing them to cut social services to those struggling populations that remained as they began strategizing on how to best recover from these financial setbacks. With all these factors converging and thereby multiplying in effect, urban "crises" broke out across the country. As the United States dealt with its economic failures as well as its troublesome urban conditions nationwide, neoliberal philosophy emerged as the answer to its problems.

Escalating in the 1980s during Reagan's presidency and becoming naturalized as the proper mode of urban governance by the 1990s, neoliberalism "is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere."⁸ Returning to classical liberalist views on government, it embodies an ideology of conflicting tendencies towards destruction and creation. Slowly but surely, there was a noticeable dismantling of the federal interventionist policies, practices, and institutions as neoliberal actors touted principles such as self-sufficiency, entrepreneurialism, and private governance. The roll out of neoliberal philosophy worked to create markets in areas where they previously did not exist, such as public housing, schools, and public infrastructure, based on the idea that free markets handle social affairs more efficiently and effectively than governments are capable of doing.⁹ Discourses of

⁸ Lipman, Pauline. *The New Political Economy of Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 6.

⁹ Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*.

growth and dynamism triumphed over maintenance of the status quo. However, it is worth nothing that neoliberalism is not a concrete *thing* as much as it is an ongoing *process*; this was the “neoliberalization” of America. While it quickly became a dominating political philosophy, it could hardly overturn every policy in place throughout the country or even within a given city. Its institutional manifestation has been highly fragmented, often resulting in an uneven landscape wherein lingering concentrations of Keynesian practices still exist.

Because of the severe budget cuts experienced during the 1970s and 80s, urban governments now found themselves moving away from the “managerial” roles they had played under Keynesian policies and becoming “much more innovative and entrepreneurial, willing to explore all kinds of avenues through which to alleviate their distressed condition and thereby secure a better future for their populations.”¹⁰ They began to work not only *with* businesses to improve their overall state of affairs, but operate *as* businesses themselves. This “entrepreneurial city” fits perfectly into a neoliberal framework because the state functions as an agent of the market system rather than as a regulator of it. Entrepreneurial urbanism is also closely linked with the development of globalization. Neoliberalism is often discussed on the international level, especially in terms of its impact on developing countries, but the consequences for American urban areas are undeniable as well. The truly “neoliberal city” no longer has its primary relationship to local or even national economies, but rather is dependent on global markets. “Global cities emerged when, in the 1970s, the global financial system expanded dramatically and foreign direct investment was dominated, not by capital invested directly in productive functions, but rather by capital moving into and between capital markets.”¹¹ In other words, national boundaries and physical locality both became much less

¹⁰ Harvey, David. “From Managerialism to entrepreneurialism: The transformation in urban governance in late capitalism.” In *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography, The Roots of Geographical Change: 1973 to the Present* 71, no. 1. (1989): 4.

¹¹ Smith, Neil. “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy.” In *Antipode* 34, no. 3. (2002): 430.

significant to the global economy. Given the financial restructuring taking place around the world, an unavoidable ethos of inter-urban competition developed not only between cities in the United States, but across the globe as well. Cities were competing for capital, as well as tourists and residents, in order to economically “make it.”

On a more local level, these intersecting forces of neoliberalism and globalization have manifested in a politico-economic phenomenon termed “glocalization.” This portmanteau of “localization” and “globalization” comes from the simultaneous upward and downward propulsion of power that accompanies the loss of the nation-state’s regulatory control. “With the decline of Keynesian economic redistribution and social compensation, local institutions increasingly serve as filters for wider economic processes. Though the boundaries for acceptable policy action have narrowed, localities have been thrust into the position of determining exactly how to address, contest, or embrace larger shifts in the global economy.”¹² Cities are left to fend for themselves financially even as they are restrained by the powers of the global economy.

Despite the modern day discourse of “small government” that conservatives and neoliberal thinkers put forth in the political sphere, the reality is that government still has a role to play in neoliberal urbanism; in fact, government is crucial to its success. Neoliberalism has “in practice entailed a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose market rule upon all aspects of social life.”¹³ While the new philosophy dictates that historically state-funded programs and institutions should be privatized or done away with altogether, urban governments are generally called upon to structure economic arrangements in markets so as to a) make sure that businesses and finance have unrestricted access to redevelopment and b) maximize profits for those who control the flows of capital. As a result, public and private

¹² Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*, 43.

¹³ Brenner, Neil, and Nik Theodore. “Cities and the Geographies of ‘Actually Existing Neoliberalism.’” In *Antipode* 34, no. 3. (2002): 352.

forces have become so intertwined with each other that the functional binary between them no longer exists. While this argument can be evidenced by the rise of the public-private partnership as the dominant financial strategy of urban development, it can be seen simply in how the terminology of power has changed. As Lipman explains, “The shift from *government* by elected state bodies and a degree of democratic accountability to *governance* by experts and managers and decision making by judicial authority and executive order is central to neoliberal policy making.”¹⁴ Private interests are supported and undergirded by public spending in a way that people often underestimate or do not understand.

Under neoliberalism, individuals are no longer thought of as “citizens” so much as “consumers”. “Citizenship, reduced to self-care, is divested of any orientation toward the common, thereby undermining an already weak investment in an *active citizenry* and an already thin concept of a *public good* from a liberal democratic table of values.”¹⁵ The same can be said about urban governance and the ways in which cities are made and remade. Instead of acting like defenders of social welfare and justice, cities now function like businesses focused on the accumulation of capital. It is worth nothing that capital has been a primary motivation and tool for reshaping urban spaces not just in the past 30 years, but for centuries. Baron Haussmann restructured Paris in the mid-nineteenth century by buying, destroying, and rebuilding huge swaths of the city, much as Robert Moses did to New York in the mid-twentieth century, and much as developers continue to do so today.¹⁶ Yet while money and capital have in some form always been at the core of these projects, the state’s role in redevelopment was remarkably different in these specific examples of urban history. Municipal governments now work in tandem with private developers, not only allowing the unrestricted

¹⁴ Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 13.

¹⁵ Brown, *American Nightmare*, 695.

¹⁶ Harvey, David. “The Right to the City.” In *New Left Review* 53 (September, October) (2008): 23-40.

movement of capital to reshape cities in ways that reflect social, racial, and class divisions, but also aiding them in such a task.

In spite of discourses that spew words such as “revitalization” and “rebirth” for cities as a whole, efforts are made solely to remold cities into distinct spaces where capital can accumulate and be protected, rather than redistributed across social classes. As neoliberal ideology has become increasingly normalized as the proper mode of governance, the geographies of inequality created by such urban approaches are accepted, justified, and eventually reinforced. Faced with the worldwide financial challenges of today, cities have crafted a number of tools to restructure markets and invigorate their economies, but this project is concerned with how strategies of urban governance have impacted the built environment. Strategic investment and disinvestment of particular urban spaces, rationalized by the free market, has led to the increasingly polarized social topography within cities. By understanding how spatial inequities in urban areas have come to exist, what they look like, and what exactly they mean for the people who live in cities, it will be easier to discuss the politics of access and exclusion.

In today’s age of competitive marketing and branding, a city’s image is paramount. As Harvey points out, “urban governance has thus become much more oriented to the provision of a ‘good business climate’ and to the construction of all sorts of lures to bring capital into town”¹⁷ and less so to the maintenance of its residents’ welfare. These “lures” are most often found in the form of businesses, tourists, and gentrifiers, all of whom bring in money as well as visible improvements to the urban imagery. It is with these particular actors in mind that cities often reshape the physical fabric within their boundaries, displacing the unsightly or undesirable in the name of the collective good. Mitchell condemns the uncomfortable relationship between public and private forces in this respect: “Local business people and property owners... prostrate themselves before the god Capital,

¹⁷ Harvey, *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism*, 11.

offering not just tax and regulatory inducements, but also extravagant convention centers, downtown tourist amusements, up-market, gentrified restaurant and bar districts, and even occasional public investment in such amenities as museums, theaters and concert halls.”¹⁸

Because of their temporary nature, Harvey cautions against the reliance on such strategies of profit making. “The emphasis upon tourism, the production and consumption of spectacles, the promotion of ephemeral events within a given locale, bear all the signs of being favoured remedies for ailing urban economies... But they are often highly speculative.”¹⁹ There is a high amount of risk involved in investing so much capital into such “ephemeral” ventures, especially when a tourism and service-based economy is much less stable than an industry-based one. Given the nature of these urban investments, the public-private partnership has come to shine most prominently as a way to use governmental power for boosting local economies. Harvey openly criticizes this relationship: “Much of the vaunted ‘public-private partnership in the United States... amounts to a subsidy for affluent consumers, corporations, and powerful command functions to stay in town at the expense of local collective consumption for the working class and poor.”²⁰ While the financial investment on the part of the local government, as well as the profits earned by private businesses, is directly measurable, the benefits to the city are not. The city allegedly receives boosted tourism or an influx of new residents, but there are very few capital returns to the government despite the investment made by the urban residents whose taxes funded these ventures. Though the disadvantages are subtle, this reality is just one way in which private interests, or wealthy capitalists with power, are privileged and prioritized over the city’s residents.

A possibly more insidious element of the public-private partnership is that allowing private forces to remake the city gives them some modicum of control over the reproduced space. By

¹⁸ Mitchell, Don. “The Annihilation of Space by Law: The Roots and Implications of Anti-Homeless Laws in the United States.” In *Antipode* 29, no. 3. (1997): 304.

¹⁹ Harvey, *From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

allowing private developers to control spaces that have historically been sites of public discourse and action, governments thereby give them the means to “unilaterally decide who has rights of access, expression, and association in the most central parts of town – effectively abolishing the First Amendment rights that attach to public spaces.”²¹ As we have seen with commercial malls and other pseudo-public spaces that have slowly replaced traditional public forums, the power that accompanies possession of capital has become more relevant than the rights that accompany citizenship. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are a problematic example of a public-private partnership because of the ability for private interests to regulate who has access to those spaces and what they can do within them. Randall Amster describes the defensive redevelopment of downtown Tempe, Arizona, and how the BID there worked to exclude certain undesirable populations on legal grounds; this phenomenon has become increasingly present in cities everywhere. Ultimately, “The goal of downtown revitalization is not to increase the race and class diversity of city patrons, but rather to create an attractive consumer climate for those who have the money to spend.”²² Urban governance thus excludes those who do not fit into such a paradigm of capital exchange.

In a strange echo of Daniel Burnham’s “City Beautiful” movement, the need to market the city has spawned this ubiquitous rationale for creating marketable, consumable spaces that will aid drawing these wealthy businesses and residents into the city. Redevelopment, however, has more often than not served as a metaphor for displacement in favor of retail transformation and consumer site development. This “Disneyfication” of space is meant to promote safety and sanitation, removing negative imagery that might drive away tourists or potential businesses. However, these “bad” attributes that visionaries often attempt to remove from such areas are generally linked to poor and minority populations. New York’s Times Square is a perfect example of

²¹ Blomley, Nicholas. *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

²² Wright, *Out of Place*, 54.

such a redevelopment scheme as its renovation in the past couple of decades has been predicated upon the removal of undesirable populations and businesses in the name of city branding and New York's collective economic prosperity.

Attempting to foster economic growth in a city by building entertainment attractions and sanitizing spaces is one aspect of the uneven geography of access, but it is generally only a precursor to gentrification. The point of this urban sterilization is to make these spaces acceptable for high-income residents to live and work there. Once these people and businesses are brought into the city, however, they continue to reshape the areas that they have "reclaimed" and push others further out. Though often framed as an improvement urban areas and a positive sign of growth,

"Gentrification is much more than the physical renovation of residential and commercial spaces. It marks the replacement of the publicly regulated Keynesian inner city – replete with physical and institutional remnants of a system designed to ameliorate the inequality of capitalism – with privately regulated neoliberalized spaces of exclusion."²³

Wealthier people move into particular spaces and, whether accidentally or by design, drive out the original residents by increasing the rents and property values for residences and businesses. In essence, gentrification is about displacement. If a particular space has value, whether to a middle class professional or to an expanding corporation, the economic worth of that space to the gentrifier supercedes the use value of the poorer resident. One should note, however, that even the meaning of gentrification has begun to move away from neighborhood revitalization and is now becoming a citywide phenomenon. "Processes of gentrification and displacement are no longer limited to individual neighborhoods; rather, entire intra-urban areas and even large parts of metropolitan regions are upgraded and transformed into zones of reproduction for metropolitan elites."²⁴

²³ Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*, 120-121.

²⁴ Schmid, Christian. "Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city, and the new metropolitan mainstream." In *Cities for People, Not for Profit*, edited by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer. (Routledge: New York, 2011), 55.

Manhattan exemplifies this argument as its middle-class neighborhoods continue to disappear, their populations pushed to the outer boroughs, New Jersey, or elsewhere.

By considering this relationship between redevelopment, gentrification, and displacement, the impact of neoliberal urbanism on the physical landscape is easy to connect to the polarized social geography of the city. However, what is important to emphasize at this point is how spatial identities are produced and what they mean for the social landscape of the city. Referencing Henri Lefebvre's *Right to the City* and the role of spatial identity in that particular discourse, Christian Schmid notes that "a space cannot be perceived without having first been conceived in the mind."²⁵ In explaining how these social definitions and meanings come into being, Wright argues, "Meaning is not arbitrary, except in an ideal sense, but 'fixed' through *social practice*, practices that reinforce the distinctions created within and between the relations of economic, political, and cultural power operating through everyday life."²⁶ What people do within those spaces – their spatial practices – creates a certain sense of social cohesion and continuity that determines what behavior is allowed there and who is allowed to do it. How policymakers and businesses create discourses about spatial functionality in term dictates whether people view that place as an acceptable space for walking, resting, shopping, or entertainment. Last, larger abstract meanings can be attached to spaces in the form of monuments, landmarks, or discourses of historic significance. Schmid complicates this analysis by commenting on how conflict can result in exclusion. "Constructions or conceptions of space are supported by social conventions that define which elements are related to one another and which ones are excluded – conventions that are not immutable, but often contested, and which are negotiated in discursive (political) practice."²⁷ There are winners and losers in the construction of social-spatial identities, with the losers often barred access to those spaces.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ Wright, *Out of Place*, 42.

²⁷ Schmid, Henri Lefebvre, 51.

While I would avoid a romanticization of the public spaces of centuries past, given that such spaces have never been fully egalitarian in terms of accessibility, there is something to be said about how neoliberalism has contributed to the ways in which these socio-spatial identities have become drastically different in the past thirty years. Notions of citizenship, of community, have been almost entirely replaced by a social discourse of consumerism and entrepreneurialism. Even in the 1980s, Harvey warned us against the rising relevance of money to urban redevelopers. “Commodity exchange and monetization challenge, subdue, and ultimately eliminate the absolute qualities of *place* and substitute relative and contingent definitions of places within the circulation of goods and money across the surface of the globe.”²⁸ In short, money has changed the ways in which we conceptualize places and define them in our minds. Wright connects the importance of urban capital to the person expected to utilize it:

“Redevelopment and gentrification of city areas, is predicated not merely on the operation of land speculation and real estate practices, but also on cultural practices that connect the visual imagery of a project, building, or plaza to the visual fantasies entertained by the target consumer, fantasies highly dependent upon the class, race, and gender composition of the buyers.”²⁹

This target consumer fits into the dominant social imaginary of spaces as places of consumption, whether through the purchasing of goods, recreational experiences, or property ownership in a respectable neighborhood. They, therefore, have become the individuals to which access to space has become unquestionable and, in many cases, exclusive. While the rhetoric of private property makes it almost impossible to challenge this new social paradigm, it is even more concerning to see this limited right of access expand to public spaces as they disappear to private developers or become heavily regulated as a defense against undesirables. Ironically, the “public sphere” is made up increasingly of just private space. Thus, the right to *any* space in today’s cities has

²⁸ Harvey, David. *The Urban Experience*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), 175.

²⁹ Wright, *Out of Place*, 112.

increasingly become attached to one's ability to afford access to that space, either through rent, ownership, or consumer activity.

Now we come at least to the issue of homeless exclusion from urban spaces. Excluded from private property on the basis that they cannot pay for access to it, the homeless are now excluded from public property because they cannot conform to the social conventions of behavior governed by the socio-spatial imaginary. Perhaps fueled by the blurring of public and private property so intrinsic to neoliberal urbanism, our imagination has become remarkably well defined when it comes to appropriate behavior within the public and private spheres, spheres we now come to view as complementary in regard to living. The private sphere is where one safely performs all personal acts, such as sleeping, urinating, washing, and cooking. The public sphere has become designated much more clearly for work, shopping, consumable recreation, and transportation between the private sphere and these functions. Given this understanding of how social imaginaries govern urban spaces, it is a simple conclusion to reach that the homeless frequently fail to act in accordance with these social conventions. Jeremy Waldron articulates this discrepancy: "This complementarity works fine for those who have the benefit of both sorts of places. However, it is disastrous for those who must live their lives on common land."³⁰

Though the private sphere has long been an important ideal in American society, its role has become frighteningly powerful as social convention dictates the retreat of the individual away from the public view whenever they wish to do anything outside of the dominant social imagination. Staeheli and Mitchell comment on the contemporary expansion of the private sphere as something much more than just the domestic home: "The private sphere is often understood as a space of social reproduction in which bodily needs are taken care of, ideas are formulated, the capacity to

³⁰ Waldron, Jeremy. "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom." In *UCLA L. Rev.* 39 (1991): 301.

debate is generated, and the political subject capable of functioning in public is nurtured.”³¹ With this definition, society cannot have a public sphere, or a population that lives solely in public, without its citizenry having a private sphere in which they can grow and develop. By not fitting into this dominant mode of social development, “Homeless people scare us; they threaten the ideological construction which declares that publicity – and action in public space – must be voluntary.”³² The fact that they *have* to perform “indecent” and other socially condemned acts in public frightens people.

Despite the distinct inability of homeless individuals to willingly comply with the rules set forth by social convention, whether unspoken or legally codified, they are consequently ostracized and villainized. Therefore, our society systematically seeks to exclude a certain percentage of society from public areas that are meant to serve the community as a whole based on a socially normalized feeling of repulsion or discomfort we experience at interacting with these people whose appearances and behavior seem so alien to us. Returning to the relationship between the social and spatial, Wright gives this warning: “Urban spaces are not ‘neutral’ backdrops to individual actions of the poor, but socially produced disciplinary spaces within which one is expected to act according to a status defined by others, a status communicated by specific appearances and locations, by the *visual* comportment of bodies.”³³ In the next chapter, I will explore how this inferior status is forced upon homeless persons and how this affects their abilities to navigate through the exclusionary urban landscape.

³¹ Staeheli, Lynn A. and Don Mitchell. “‘Don’t Talk with Strangers’: Regulating Property, Purifying the Public.” In *Griffith Law Review* 17, no. 2. (2008): 537.

³² Mitchell, *The Annihilation of Space by Law*, 320.

³³ Wright, *Out of Place*, 6.

Chapter Two

Homeless Identities and the Geography of Survival

“Keeping order, being respectable, means not crossing boundaries established by privilege and power. It means being in your place. Skillful transgressing of these boundaries is essential for securing any real power for marginalized groups.”³⁴

By understanding how social imaginaries often exclude homeless people based on their inability to conform to socially constructed and reinforced conventions on behavior, one can begin to craft a finer understanding of how the homeless navigate cities. While the previous chapter briefly addresses how and why homeless individuals fail to fit into these rigid socio-spatial definitions of access, this chapter explores what it means to be homeless and living in an urban landscape. I will examine how the meaning of homelessness has changed throughout the past century and what the “New Homelessness” of today looks like. In conjunction with this discussion will be an exploration on the causes of homelessness, including historic changes and evolving socio-political viewpoints on the issue. Taking both these discussions into consideration, I will then turn to the idea of the “geography of survival”³⁵ and explore how the New Homeless navigate through urban spaces in an attempt to meet their physical, mental, and medical needs. Ultimately, I hope to connect the radical changes in urban spaces over the past thirty years to the lived experience of homeless individuals and families seeking to survive within its increasingly limited terrain of accessibility.

³⁴ Wright, *Out of Place*, 70.

³⁵ Mitchell, Don and Nik Heynen. “The Geography of Survival and the Right to the City: Speculations on Surveillance, Legal Innovation, and the Criminalization of Intervention.” In *Urban Geography* 30, no. 6. (2009), 611-632.

Throughout the history of the United States, policy-makers, media sources, and people everywhere have perpetually constructed a one-dimensional image of the disreputable homeless person. In *Lost in Space*, Randall Amster points out that a relatively rigid social relationship has existed between the housed and unhoused throughout the past several centuries: “Often identified as *deviant, diseased, dangerous, disaffiliated, and undesirable*, the vagabond or vagrant has since at least the 14th century been the subject of punitive and legislative efforts aimed at limiting and/or eliminating their presence in cities or towns.”³⁶ In other words, social exclusion of the itinerant stranger has a strong historic precedent. In order to best understand the plight of the homeless in twenty-first century America, a brief discussion on its evolution throughout the past century is necessary. Because of the fluidity of cultural memory, social meanings have remained attached to the condition even as the root causes and societal ramifications of it have changed drastically in the shifting politico-economic history of this country.

Homelessness has existed in the United States since its colonial days. Peter Rossi describes how the phenomena of the “deserving/undeserving” binary existed even back then as settler communities accepted some “unsettled” people and drove others away.³⁷ The post-Civil War period, coinciding with the end of the Industrial Revolution, saw a peak in the numbers of homeless people due to rising population sizes, changing economic structures, and the consequences of war- and sickness-related familial deaths. However, the line between “homeless” and “transient” became blurred and less socially restrictive due to the frequency with which people moved about for different employment opportunities. In any case, individuals perceived to be homeless were treated very rarely with respect, an unsurprising phenomenon in that period of our nation’s history.

³⁶ Amster, Randall. *Lost in Space: The Criminalization, Globalization, and Urban Ecology of Homelessness*. (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2008), 4. Emphasis by author.

³⁷ Rossi, Peter. *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17.

Beginning in the 1880s and continuing into the early decades of the twentieth century, the U.S. saw some significant changes in the homeless condition, many of which continue to impact the ways in which Americans conceptualize and treat the issue. Whereas transience had once so heavily defined the homeless, rapid urbanization across the country now found many of them settled in cities. Areas known as “Skid Rows” grew in size and population, becoming associated with urban decay and deviant behavior as lowlifes, itinerants, and alcoholics congregated there. Characterized by single-room-occupancy apartments and other cheap housing options, as well as disreputable businesses such as taverns and pawnshops, these spaces catered mostly to single men without families who collectively served as a seasonal unskilled labor force for urban industries. Due in part to the role of Skid Rows as employment centers for casual laborers and as hubs for single, socially aberrant men, the condition of homelessness became highly masculinized during this era. Sociologist Nels Anderson described it in the 1920s by stating, “homelessness marked off persons who were living transient lives outside conventional family contexts.”³⁸ It is interesting how people of this era defined a “homeless” person much more strongly by his or her social position and behavior than by economic situation. Many of these people, largely men, had places to sleep and money to buy food. Due to the changing social norms of family structure as well as extreme inequality, the definition of homelessness now sharply leans towards economic poverty, though identity and behavior obviously continue to factor into social exclusion.

After 1920, Skid Rows began to decline as changing economic structures reduced the demand for labor that the so-called “homeless” men supplied. Soon after, the Great Depression of the 1930s so financially devastated cities that they could not contain the hordes of people who now found themselves without a home. In the post-war period of the 1950s, the U.S. saw a decrease in their overall homeless population, though the Skid Rows of the nation remained distinctive

³⁸ As quoted in Rossi, *Down and Out*, 22.

neighborhoods even without their traditional occupants. Between the 1950s and 1970s, national economic security and the rise of the welfare state reduced the number of people without homes, thereby significantly lessening the visibility of homelessness as a social issue as well as the need for cities to accommodate physically for their existence.

It was in the 1970s and 80s that the “New Homeless” began to appear as the social demographic we recognize today. On the whole, we define a homeless individual as someone “not having customary and regular access to a conventional dwelling,”³⁹ meaning that property has become a defining feature of the condition rather than its social, or familial, implications. However, these new individuals can hardly escape the dominant identity traits that history has attached to them. Don Mitchell articulates this phenomenon well:

“During the relatively stable long boom from the end of World War II until the early 1970s, homelessness in American cities was scripted quite clearly by discourses centered around deviance, disaffiliation and alcoholism. The stereotypical homeless person was the single male skid row bum subsisting on mission charity and fortified wine.”⁴⁰

These negative characteristics, based often on discourses of individual accountability and responsibility, continue to haunt social and political discourse though they hardly reflect the average homeless person of today.

Though demographic similarities undoubtedly still exist, the new homeless little resemble their counterparts of the early twentieth century. The Annual Homeless Assessment Report of 2010 found that individual homeless people were often white men over thirty with a disabling condition, which fits in strongly with the historic social image of the “bum.” However, increasing numbers of women and children now depend on the shelter system or live on the streets. These homeless families, predominantly African-American and female-headed, have increased by 20 percent from

³⁹ Rossi, *Down and Out*, 10.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *The Annihilation of Space by Law*, 317.

2007 to 2010 and represent a much larger share of the total sheltered population than ever before⁴¹

The trope of the “old tramp” has also dematerialized as young people in their teens, twenties, and thirties become homeless. Young people turn to the street when they have no jobs or adequate social infrastructure to support them. Despite the rising numbers of homeless youth, this issue continues to be downplayed in order to perpetuate the belief that homeless people always choose their life, either willingly or out of laziness.

While there is much value in understanding how homeless identities have changed demographically, an equally important distinction to make is how the experiences of homeless people have changed. In the Skid Rows of the 1880-1920s, work was a major element in a so-called homeless person’s life as many men worked in factories in order to provide a meager existence for themselves. Transience, specifically the absence of sedentary living, was often due to temporary employment and not necessarily a crippling lack of finances or shelter. However, with job opportunities increasingly unavailable for individuals without training or specialization, today’s homeless individuals simply do not have the opportunity to work for subsistence. Perhaps because of this historic connection between unskilled labor and homelessness, many Americans believe that the homeless live as they do out of laziness in spite of the reality of unemployment and job insecurity. Rossi also emphasizes that a

“major difference between the old and the new homeless is that the old homeless routinely managed somehow to find shelter indoors, while a majority of the new homeless in most studies are out on the streets. As far as shelter goes, the new homeless are clearly worse off. In short, *homelessness today means more severe basic shelter deprivation.*”⁴²

People considered “homeless” usually had some sort of rough accommodation, even if no permanent home as other classes might consider appropriate or desirable. It is thus entirely possible

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. “The 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.” Accessed December 9, 2012.
<<https://www.onecpd.info/resources/documents/2010homelessassessmentreport.pdf>>.

⁴² Rossi, *Down and Out*, 38-39. Emphasis by author.

that historic precedent has rendered invisible the severe hardship that is living on the streets today. Geographies of shelter have therefore come a long way in urban history, and not for the better.

Of course, some characteristics of living homelessness have remained relatively the same throughout United States history. Physical and mental disabilities have always commonly afflicted people suffering in poor living conditions and on the streets, a fact that reflects on the deinstitutionalization of mental health in the past few decades. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among veterans and others has consistently been noted as a symptom of people found living on the streets. Drug and alcohol abuse is observable in a large percentage of people who utilize the shelter system or live on the streets. There are constantly issues of safety, and many homeless people have a complicated relationship with crime wherein they alternate between victim and perpetrator. Social exclusion from communities and spaces, the very subject of this paper, has existed in the form of outright ostracization and spatial contestation. More than anything, though, the struggle to survive has been one of the central elements of what it means to be homeless.

One of the most critical subjects in discussing the issue of homelessness across cities is exactly how many people suffer from this condition. Given the nature of what it means to be homeless, census records can hardly keep track of it as they can when it comes to race and gender. It is incredibly hard to find accurate and succinct statistical data on the number of homeless bodies in this country. Two government-sponsored undertakings in the past few years have yielded credible point estimates by counting people who have come into contact with the homeless services infrastructure. The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC)'s estimates "suggest average daily and weekly populations of 267,000 and 440,000, respectively, inclusive of homeless service consumers and their accompanying children."⁴³ Relying more on local Continuum of Care (CoC) agencies to make single-day counts, the U.S. Department of Housing and

⁴³ Lee, Barrett A., Kimberly A. Tyler, and James D. Wright. "The New Homelessness Revisited." In *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 504.

Urban Development (HUD) compiled data that suggests approximately 665,000 homeless in the United States.⁴⁴ Additionally, in a 2010 survey of 27 large cities, “the U.S. Conference of Mayors observed that 52 percent of cities have seen an increase in overall homelessness, while 58 percent have seen an increase in family homelessness.”⁴⁵

On a methodological level, counting the homeless is rife with difficulties and inaccuracies. Hopper et al. explore how street count measures, one of the most common forms of estimating homeless people, often do not count certain people as homeless because they do not “look” the part, and vice versa.⁴⁶ Counters also do not take homeless survival strategies into consideration as they rarely look in abandoned buildings, cars, and hidden spaces to find people who have holed away. Even more complicating, however, is the fact that homelessness is not a permanent identity, even over a short-term period. Much as homelessness was once associated with transience, it now is often categorized as temporary, episodic, and chronic.⁴⁷ For example, an abused mother and her children who spend a few nights in a shelter are technically without home, at least for a while. Many more people like this experience temporary or episodic homelessness rather than chronically, but it is the perpetually homeless bum that captures our imagination. This is also why simply counting the number of people who use homeless-related services cannot accurately reflect the number of people living on the streets. Reflecting this assertion, the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report found that “More than 1.59 million people spent at least 1 night in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program during the 2010 AHAR reporting period, a 2.2 increase from 2009.”⁴⁸ The 2010

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ National Law Center on Poverty and Homelessness. “Criminalizing Crisis: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities.” 2011 Report. Accessed 4 January 2013, <http://www.nlchp.org/content/pubs/11.14.11%20Criminalization%20Report%20&%20Advocacy%20Manual,%20FI%20NAL1.pdf>, 6.

⁴⁶ Hopper, Kim, Marybeth Shinn, Eugene Laska, Morris Meisner, and Joseph Wanderling. “Estimating Numbers of Unsheltered Homeless People Through Plant-Capture and Postcount Survey Methods.” In *American Journal of Public Health* 98, no. 8. (August 2008): 1438-1442.

⁴⁷ Rossi, *Down and Out*.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, AHAR 2010, ii.

AHAR also claims that chronic homelessness decreased by 11 percent between 2007 and 2010 as a result of improved permanent supportive housing programs, but this statistic could be off base thanks to the measurement fallacies I have already described. In New York, at least, organizations such as Coalition for the Homeless assert that homelessness has reached the highest levels since the Great Depression.

Using this developed framework of homeless identities and how many people possibly suffer from it, it should now be easier to explore *why* this condition exists in our society. Schools of thought tend to diverge into two separate camps, following either an individualist or structuralist viewpoint. Individualists believe that the plight of homelessness is usually brought about as a result of personal fault or failure while structuralists argue that larger issues such as inaccessibility, marginalization, and a lack of resources cause people to become homeless. Though individualist arguments must be addressed in some respects, I echo much of the scholarly work I have discussed thus far, particularly Harvey, Mitchell, and Hackworth, when I argue that a Marxist analysis of structural inequality must be applied to this issue. Throughout the history of the United States and the developed world, the criminalization of poverty has been an essential part of the uneven development of capitalism.⁴⁹ The proletariat of the Communist Manifesto exists because of the inequities produced by the capitalist system of production and consumption; the entire socio-economic structure depends on the creation and perpetuation of class divisions. However, the reality of social hierarchy becomes much more insidious when concerted social oppression enters the mix. Mitchell points out that if the poor, or “paupers,” are left to challenge their unfair social and economic status, then they might disrupt the flows of capital and its accumulation. “The very existence of such an army of poverty, which is so necessary to the expansion of capital, means there is an army of humanity that must be strictly controlled, else it undermine the drive towards

⁴⁹ Mitchell, *The Annihilation of Space by Law*.

accumulation.”⁵⁰ It is not enough that an underclass exists, it must also be oppressed in order to avoid a social revolution geared towards equality. Capitalism as an ideological force leaves no room for rectifying social inequality or the injustices that accompany it.

If structural forces cause homelessness, on what grounds do individualists base their arguments? Rossi begins to address this issue: “The extremely poor constitute the pool from which the homeless are drawn; they are at high risk of becoming homeless and from time to time find themselves in that condition.”⁵¹ In other words, though our structural inequalities necessitate the existence of a homeless population, personal factors such as mental illness or lack of familial support help determine exactly who amongst the extremely poor are faced with such circumstances. However, many of these “personal factors” are in truth structurally caused by barriers such as lack of mental health care and unavailable housing. “There has been a reinvestment in a language of deviance and individual disorder at the expense of structural explanations for homelessness”⁵² because the highly visible and seemingly individual reasons for a person’s homeless condition easily allow for a discourse of victim blaming. According to Lee et al., homeless individuals themselves “regularly cite manifestations of structural dislocations such as increased housing costs or lack of work when asked why they are homeless.”⁵³

The relationship between the housing market and homelessness cannot be underscored either because the amount of housing available to people directly impacts the number of people who do not have it. People may argue that there is enough housing out there, easily findable on the Internet or through real estate agencies, but homelessness will continue to grow as a social condition as gentrification and entrepreneurial urban redevelopment continuously privilege the construction of housing unaffordable to the poorer classes. In fact, it is largely only through homelessness

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁵¹ Rossi, *Down and Out*, 8-9.

⁵² Mitchell, *The Annihilation of Space by Law*, 317.

⁵³ Lee, Barrett A., et al, *The New Homelessness Revisited*, 509.

prevention programs, rapid re-housing, and permanent housing programs that the tides of homelessness are currently held at bay.⁵⁴ Without these services in place, the “free market” in housing celebrated by neoliberals would devastate the social topography of cities. However, Mitchell asserts, and I would agree, “In the contemporary city of homelessness the right to inhabit the city must always be asserted not within, but against, the rights of property.”⁵⁵ Reflecting both Rossi and Marx’s views on the unavoidable demographic of poverty in contemporary capitalist society, I therefore argue that no matter *who* becomes homeless, there will always *be* homeless people unless we radically alter the way we address the structural conditions that manufacture the phenomenon.

One of the most dangerous and oft-articulated assertions of individualism is the argument that many of the homeless *choose* to live like that. In addressing this issue, I want to avoid a common problem described by Amster, wherein “homelessness is generally considered a pathological condition at worst and a state of victimization at best.”⁵⁶ While it *is* structural victimization to a certain extent, one can be a victim of oppressive structures while also maintaining a degree of autonomy. In strategizing their survival, homeless individuals must make choices every day, often with greater consequences for their well-being than the ones we as housed individuals do. Some people brave life on the streets in order to avoid certain oppressive institutions or violent environments, while others refuse to enter into a single-sex homeless shelter without their loved ones. These actions, however, cannot be misinterpreted as legitimate “free choice” given that very few people, if any, would choose such a life over one of relative comfort in a safe home. That the homeless must make these difficult decisions, some of which might make little sense to someone with a home, should not weigh against them in discussions about their rights as people. “Homeless people may indeed at times be constrained to choose from among a limited and unappealing range

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, AHAR 2010, iii.

⁵⁵ Mitchell, Don. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 20.

⁵⁶ Amster, *Lost in Space*, 7.

of options, but to deny their capacity to exercise choice and construct their identities is to deny the status as full human agents.”⁵⁷ In response to claims that living on the streets is a lifestyle *choice*, I counter that it is in fact a life *strategy*.

Keeping this term in mind, I now turn to discuss at last the “geography of survival” of the urban homeless. “Whether deliberate or compelled, desperate or utopian, nomadic or stationary, the experience of being homeless often revolves around addressing basic questions of survival.”⁵⁸ This concept is firmly linked to the exclusionary socio-spatial imaginaries of urban spaces actualized by the neoliberalization of urban governance and spatial redevelopment. As forces of privatization encroach upon public spaces, socially and legally limiting who has access to them, the homeless navigate an increasingly hostile terrain dotted by very few openly accepting institutions and spaces, what I call “nodes” of survival. “Indeed, the only way they can get by is to look to the shelters for a place to sleep, to the food kitchens for meals, to the free clinics and emergency rooms for medical care, and to the clothing distribution depots for something to put on their backs.”⁵⁹ Homeless individuals, whether through personal diligence or social connections, often learn to utilize this network of services in order to meet their basic needs. Despite the aim of such philanthropic services to ameliorate the condition of homelessness, they unfortunately do not provide a legitimate “place” where the homeless can belong; rather, these are the spaces in which the homeless are “contained.” It is acceptable, and generally expected, for them to utilize these services but never become overly at ease within them. Access to shelters is often limited and conditional, while shelter life itself is usually unpleasant and strictly regulated. The staff can be harsh and unfriendly, even cruel. In addition, while shelters may provide basic needs for survival, they can offer little in terms of less tangible resources like safety, stimulation, companionship, and freedom.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

Why this paradox of providing shelter to the needy but making it a horrible, difficult experience? The housed majority must strike an uncomfortable balance between the desire to keep the homeless population out of sight and the insistence that their tax money not go towards the undeserving poor. Here again, society continues to perpetuate a discourse of blame for those suffering the homeless condition. People who live in neighborhoods with many such nodes of survival are often hostile towards the “freeloaders”. Even municipal governments, responsible for every constituent rich or poor, often argue that they are not required to pay for the “choices” made by the homeless. Kohn articulates the issue well: “If homelessness is perceived as a lifestyle choice... it is unclear why taxpayers should subsidize this choice by providing safe shelters, facilities, or outreach programs.”⁶⁰ There is a cognitive disconnect wherein we understand that these services are necessary for the survival of thousands of people, but we cannot accept that perhaps there are forces outside of the homeless individual’s control that drive them there.

However, these spaces are not the true, absolute geography of survival for the homeless. Perhaps expanding on Mitchell and Heynen’s original use of the term, I consider the geography of survival to include not only the institutional services to which the homeless turn for aid, but also the autonomous, self-driven strategies of survival they employ as they move throughout the city. They cannot depend only on the benevolence of public or non-profit forces, given the unreliability and inflexibility of such institutions to meet more than their basic needs of survival. Instead, they must rely on their own powers of improvisation and willingness to defy or avoid their oppressors in regulated public or private spaces. Limited to whatever spaces are actually open to them, homeless people turn to the wider expanse of the city, moving through pockets of exclusion, surveillance, and restriction. In doing so, they upset the social imaginaries put so carefully in place by people in power. They fragment these hegemonic visions of normality by subverting the use of spaces with

⁶⁰ Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 179.

their presence and behavior. On streets and sidewalks, they rest instead of moving. In parks and playgrounds, they do not engage in purely recreational activity as they must use that open space to perform activities such as sleeping, urinating, and eating that are necessary for survival. The homeless must legally trespass in many cases as laws are increasingly passed that seek to limit their access and regulate their behavior. Shortened hours, watchful guards, and physical barriers such as armrests on benches work to exclude the undesirable. Whether through fear or spite, society continues to search for ways to hinder their survival in these lingering physical spaces they still can enter. As such, the homeless often take advantage of the fractured functionality of urban spaces, living moments of their lives in alleyways, bushes, cars, and abandoned buildings. “For those living on the streets, the separations between functions, between functional spaces, can also provide a wedge within which to insert themselves, to find a space ‘in between’ where they can sleep or do their business and survive without having a permanent residence.”⁶¹ While the housed move about within and between urban spaces with distinct purpose, understanding the appropriate utility for each one, these distinctions become blurred and indistinct as the homeless use them to survive.

Also inherent to the geography of survival are the actions and interactions that happen within urban spaces. Counter to the longstanding narrative of the homeless as lazy and workless, many engage in legitimate part-time work that simply does not pay for long-term housing. More, however, engage in shadow work to meet their needs. “Shadow work comprises resource-generating efforts outside the formal economy, including scavenging, panhandling, recycling, bartering, street vending, plasma donation, and illegal acts such as theft, prostitution, and drug sales.”⁶² This type of work is hardly the most remunerative, but it certainly is better than simply doing nothing. Lee et al. admit that “Most forms of shadow work have a low skill threshold, yet they give practitioners a

⁶¹ Wright, *Out of Place*, 110.

⁶² Lee, Barrett A., et al, *The New Homelessness Revisited*, 507.

sense of control and self-respect, not to mention an outlet for entrepreneurial impulses.”⁶³ (507-508). Homeless people not only want to do what they can to improve their lives, they also have needs, desires, and the drive to be regular functioning human beings. In our capitalist society, performing work is not only socially reinforced positively, but negatively as well. When the homeless fail, or seem to fail, in contributing to society in a productive way, that is but one excuse for the discrimination loosed against them. By working, even in nefarious shadow economies, homeless individuals can become more self-sufficient and avoid internalizing some of that hostility.

Much like the condition of homelessness itself, the geography of survival has been radically altered with the progression of time and the changing norms of spatial development and functionality. For the transient and socially aberrant of the early twentieth century, Skid Rows were a physical space where one could secure basic income, cheap lodging, and entertainment. Individuals who did not fit into the strict social definitions of normality or conformity were in essence granted this isolated space. However, Skid Rows were spaces of containment as much as freedom. As gentrification and redevelopment have begun to redefine the social geography of urban spaces over the past half century, even these spaces have disappeared. Perhaps it is positive that such locales of urban dilapidation have been remade, but it is not the spaces themselves that are the concern so much as the people. In spite of the living conditions of these areas, at least the itinerant knew where their place was. With the reshaping of urban zones into high-income housing or Disneyfied, consumable spaces, the people who once relied on these areas for survival are pushed out rather than helped up. I do not make the case that the homeless should reclaim their isolated Skid Rows, but I believe it important to acknowledge that as the space available to the entire public shrinks year by year, the population in need of such spaces continues to grow.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 507-508.

As I have described, the geography of survival can hardly be limited to the quasi-accepting nodes of service provided by the state or charitable firms. Despite this fact, the existence of these services is often used as a tool to deny the homeless access to the greater reach of the city. Mitchell and Heynen admit the complexity of this arrangement, stating, “Those who survive, do so both because of the *ad hoc* institutional geography that has arisen since the current homeless ‘crisis’ erupted in the late 1970s, and despite it.”⁶⁴ If the homeless have access to these services, then they should be there instead of out on the streets or in parks. These sites are socially constructed as the proper “place” for the homeless to be even as they are under-funded, made into unwelcoming or unavailable spaces, and have their very existence challenged by those upon whose territory they encroach. In essence, I believe this is because in the dominant social-spatial imaginary of the urban population, the homeless truly have no place to be.

Integral to the geography of survival is its counterpart, the geography of alienation. They are not complementary, but rather overlap, as spaces of survival are the very spaces over which the homeless must fight for access. In most of this paper, the exclusionary attitude of urban redevelopers and governments has been well described, but their tactics of discrimination less so. In this next chapter, I will discuss how the rights of the homeless are consistently violated with little question, how the Right to the City can be utilized as a discourse advocating for homeless rights, and how failing to address these social inequities ultimately has repercussions for the whole of society.

⁶⁴ Mitchell and Heynen, *The Geography of Survival*, 613.

Chapter Three

Regulating the Right to the City

“Indeed, it is mildly shocking to discover that the ‘radical’ position on the condition of the homeless is one that argues for their right simply to exist! And yet, as will be explored herein, sometimes the mere existence and presence of homeless bodies in public places can be among the most revolutionary statements of all.”⁶⁵

The passage above illustrates one of the ultimate points of this narrative. By keeping the homeless invisible, excluded from spaces of “normality” where only certain forms of behavior are permitted, we lessen our own ability to empathize with an oppressed minority, acknowledge their rights as human beings, and work towards alleviating their suffering. Instead, we perpetuate a culture of surveillance, discrimination, and widespread exclusivity that permeates not only social attitudes but also state legislation in order to make the life of a street person increasingly difficult. As Wright comments, “The hypermodern city is a reconstruction of the Social Darwinian landscape”⁶⁶ wherein major forces are working to make the homeless, not homelessness, disappear. Examining the exclusionary tactics of urban governance, I turn to Henri Lefebvre’s *Right to the City* in order to begin crafting an argument in defense of the homeless as citizens and rightful participants in the public sphere and meaning-making of urban life.

Anti-homeless laws have become sacrosanct in cities, integrated so fully into the regulation of public space that we either fail to comprehend the insidious intent behind them or we blindly accept it. The idea that the homeless should not be allowed in public spaces has become ingrained within us because the discomfort felt upon witnessing their plight is something our privileged social position allows us to banish. Thus, government institutions and businesses, often working together

⁶⁵ Amster, *Lost in Space*, 13.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Out of Place*, 9.

in public-private partnerships, have created a number of strategies geared to exclude, repress, and contain homeless populations that may “invade” their spaces. Despite the justifications these people might make, their actions oppress a population of people already dehumanized and criminalized based on their socioeconomic disadvantages. Inherent to these discriminatory systems is the idea that homeless people, or people even perceived to be homeless, can be outright banned from a particular space. This type of exclusion is found most commonly with private property, where access is legally restricted to those with permission from the owner(s). Trespass laws and enforcement “are becoming a primary means to sort as well as authorize who can be in what space in the contemporary city.”⁶⁷ As the ability to exclude the homeless based on their appearance and behavior expands to different municipalities, we exacerbate an already present urban apartheid through consistent displacement.⁶⁸

Despite the growing prevalence of outright bans, many more localities still rely on the restriction of certain behaviors in order to regulate more subtly the undesirable populations they wish to exclude. The primary technique for achieving this end reflects the public/private sphere binary explored in chapter two in that governments and businesses forbid the “inappropriate” survival behavior displayed by the homeless in public, behavior which the non-homeless have the privilege of performing privately. As Kohn points out though, “No amount of criminalization or harassment can prevent people from performing activities intrinsic to life itself, although policing strategies certainly can confine the homeless to certain limited zones of the city that are out of sight of the more affluent citizens.”⁶⁹ In a survey to 154 service providers, advocates, and people experiencing homelessness in 26 different states, the NCLHP found that criminalization measures commonly pertaining to public urination/defecation (73 percent of respondents), sleeping (55

⁶⁷ Mitchell and Heynen, *The Geography of Survival*, 622.

⁶⁸ Amster, *Lost in Space*.

⁶⁹ Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 167.

percent), loitering (55 percent), and public storage of belongings (20 percent) frequently resulted in arrests, citations, or both.⁷⁰ Furthermore, more than 80 percent of these respondents reporting these restrictions also indicated that “their cities lack sufficient shelter beds, public bathrooms, and/or free-to-low rent cost storage options for the person belongings of homeless persons.”⁷¹ In fact, cities everywhere have come to dismantle or close down such public facilities that would make the lives of the homeless more bearable. Public restrooms have almost become a thing of the past. Because non-homeless people can live without them, the hope is that the disappearance of these amenities will drive the homeless away. Providing a particular example of how this discourse of exclusion violates people’s rights, Mitchell points out that, “No matter how appalling it might be to argue and struggle in favor of the *right* to sleep on the streets or urinate in an alley, it is even more appalling, given the current ruthless rate at which homelessness is produced, to argue that homeless people should *not* have this right.”⁷²

It is not just the mere presence of the homeless, nor their necessary human activities, that have become the focus of anti-homeless ordinances. Though the very sight of the homeless has been used to justify their exclusion thanks to the sensitivities of the housed majority, active strategies of survival such as begging and panhandling have been condemned as well. We can link this back to the exaltation of consumer spaces as “Local businesses in downtown areas routinely complain that homeless people disrupt their ability to conduct commerce, and shoppers complain of being harassed for donations.”⁷³ It is unfortunate that people feel “harassed,” but it is also unfortunate that they benefit from an inegalitarian socio-economic structure that leaves the homeless destitute and without money. And yet, redistribution even in the form of charitable kindness is looked down upon. Many cities have begun to criminalize the very act of helping the homeless, citing that it

⁷⁰ NCLHP, *Criminalizing Crisis*, 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Mitchell, *The Right to the City*, 27.

⁷³ Wright, *Out of Place*, 179.

encourages them to linger in these cities and fails to move them along. Charitable organizations and even helpful individuals can be ticketed for distributing food to the homeless because such a “handout” encourages their presence in a direct reversal of the urban governance’s desire to drive them out. When handing out food to hungry people in need becomes illegal, we should take pause and consider the implications for democratic society.

Begging itself, an element of the geography of survival as it is one tactic used to secure money and food, is essentially a matter of free speech, albeit one that is conveniently ignored because of the power exerted those policy-makers opposed to homelessness. Though begging is often considered harassment, it is unfair to consider it such in all cases. “While some acts of begging may be conducted in a manner that constitutes harassment – for example, where the person solicited is persistently followed, impeded in his or her movements, or threatened upon a refusal to give – nothing about begging *simpliciter* makes it harassment.”⁷⁴ This relentless association likely reflects our society’s desire to criminalize homeless people and behaviors even when they fit into the letter of the law. Narayan continues this train of thought by stating, “it is not fair to curtail important liberties of a whole group of people on the grounds that *some* of them engage in harassment,”⁷⁵ much as one would not condemn all men from riding the subway simply because some men harass women while there.

Lastly, there is the issue of surveillance in cities. Seemingly adopting Jeremy Bentham’s conception of the *panopticon*, urban governances have begun to regulate residents by creating an environment where constant surveillance is accepted as the norm. Despite legal challenges, “case law in the United States is making it increasingly clear that in publicly accessible spaces, citizens have no

⁷⁴ Narayan, Uma. “No Shelter Even in the Constitution? Free Speech, Equal Protection, and the Homeless.” In *The Ethics of Homelessness: Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by G. John M. Abbarno. (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), 158.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

right to privacy: we have no right to absent ourselves from surveillance.”⁷⁶ This type of defensive urbanism is justified on grounds of security, anti-crime, and even anti-terrorism, but it also creates an atmosphere wherein people feel watched, regulated, and judged. For most residents, they rest easy knowing that they are “in their place.” However, others do not have such fortune. “The urban habitat these other people – the homeless – now must inhabit is one of total exposure.”⁷⁷ Even when not performing acts criminalized by discriminatory anti-homeless ordinances, the homeless are made to feel unwelcome. Legal restrictions are hardly necessary to drive people away when the privileged have the ability to exert their power without even while violating people’s basic rights. In this way, the homeless can forcefully be made to “move it along” even without the power of the law behind their discriminators. Because of the ubiquitous power of the social-spatial imaginaries in which they do not have a place, their exclusion is rarely questioned on moral grounds. Housed society imagines them to be “out of place” and thus “the homeless are subject to the continual gaze of authority to ensure that their actions will not violate ‘proper’ social boundaries.”⁷⁸

Writing in 1996, Yale professor Robert Ellickson made one of the most memorable cases in favor of discrimination against homeless persons. With his well-known article “Controlling Chronic Misconduct in City Spaces,”⁷⁹ Ellickson established an argument long referenced in the fight against homeless rights of access and security. In the previous chapter I addressed the fact that the homeless are people with agency who often make difficult choices to best fit their needs. Ellickson picks up on this sentiment of autonomy, but then twists it to not only romanticize the state of homelessness, but also to make a case for their social exclusion:

⁷⁶ Mitchell and Heynen, *The Geography of Survival*, 619.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 620.

⁷⁸ Wright, *Out of Place*, 181.

⁷⁹ Ellickson, Robert C. “Controlling Chronic Misconduct in City Spaces: Of Panhandlers, Skid Rows, and Public-Space Zoning.” In *Faculty Scholarship Series* (1996). Paper 408. Accessed July 28, 2012, http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/408.

“The life histories [of street people] have infinite variety and are never entirely bleak. Indeed, most street people have a sense of pride and control themselves remarkably well, especially given their disadvantaged backgrounds. Many, however, will not necessarily comply with social norms of behavior without some form of external constraint.”⁸⁰

Taking a decisively individualist stance on the cause of homelessness, Ellickson firmly believes that these people choose their lifestyle as “street people.” In his mind, reflective of the neoconservative ideology, restrictive rules of social conduct make a society safer and more enjoyable for the majority of people. “Rules of proper street behavior are not an impediment to freedom, but a foundation of it.”⁸¹

However, Ellickson goes much further than suggesting that the visible activity of the homeless in urban spaces should be limited; he actively supports a policy of “rezoning” cities into red, yellow, and green zones of varying acceptability of social behavior and activity. Kohn argues that this “Zoning is motivated by the desire to create a veil of ignorance,”⁸² and I cannot help but agree. Part of what this paper has sought to communicate is how the majority of society constantly discriminates against the homeless, both socially and legally. Such blatant prejudice is culturally accepted and normalized. As horrible as this is, however, what happens when we begin to further segregate our cities according to these “norms” of civility? In reality, this type of zoning already exists. Our cities are segregated along racial and class lines, but Ellickson would take this informal system of spatial segregation and strengthen it within the law. Because street nuisances are such an affront to him, he prioritizes the discomfort of seeing street people over the discomfort of being one. And while Ellickson may argue in 1996 for the formal rezoning of cities into this segregated landscape, the might of the neoliberalizing project in today’s world would likely change his argument to one of pure ostracization rather than containment. He adds an additional insidious component to

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1195.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1174.

⁸² Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 180.

his case, however, when he argues that unless city dwellers can enjoy “a basic minimum of decorum in downtown public spaces, they will increasingly flee from those locations to cyberspace, suburban malls, and private wall communities.”⁸³ He thus plays on the economic insecurities of the entrepreneurial city by making the claim that if the homeless are not forced out and away, those with money will leave.

In many ways, Ellickson subtly draws upon the Broken Windows argument introduced by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling⁸⁴ in order to support his argument against the acceptance of the homeless within public urban spaces. According to these authors, how residents and potential criminals perceive the rate of criminal activity will impact the behavior of people within a particular space regardless of how much criminal activity is actually taking place. In this sense, allowing homeless people to live in public spaces and behave in “disorderly” ways will draw more homeless people in. At the same time, the people who live in that area will feel unsafe and become afraid, regardless of how little of a threat the homeless realistically are. As Wilson and Kelling put, “we tend to overlook or forget another source of fear – the fear of being bothered by disorderly people.”⁸⁵ Rather than challenge that fear, and perhaps prove it unfounded, our culture normalizes it. It is expected of us to shun the destitute, giving them neither respect nor assistance; to give either, in fact, is verboten. Waldron challenges the application of broken windows theory to homelessness, asking, “Relative to whatever norms are appropriate, what (according to the Kelling and Wilson approach) is to count as *fixing* the window, when the ‘broken window’ is a human being?”⁸⁶

⁸³ Ellickson, Controlling Chronic Misconduct, 1172.

⁸⁴ Wilson, James Q. and George L. Kelling. “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety.” In *The Atlantic* (March 1982).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁶ Waldron, Jeremy. “Homelessness and Community.” In *The University of Toronto Law Journal* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 387.

However, this broken windows discourse has two flaws in it when it comes to the homeless. First, those individuals who are privileged to create the “proper” rules of conduct, either socially or legally, have the ability to institutionalize the social convention that their particular class(es) consider normative. This phenomenon is not restricted solely to issues of homeless exclusion as policy everywhere reflects social, racial, and gender-based discrimination. But while a neighborhood’s rules of local public order should be respected, rules that exclude people based on discriminatory measures should be challenged. Second, the argument that “everyone” in society should be able to enjoy public spaces free of harassment (and homeless)-free belies the reality that housed persons can retreat to private spaces whereas the unhoused have no such right. Excluded from private property due to their particular status, the homeless have no other place to go. If one operates under the assumption that every individual in the United States has equal rights under the law, a person who cannot survive without access to space should hold more weight than a person who is merely inconvenienced. Anatole France’s famous dictum expresses this issue well: “la majestueuse égalité des lois... interdit au riche comme au pauvre de coucher sous les ponts” [The law in its majestic equality forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under the bridges].⁸⁷ The law might be equal but nevertheless discriminatory in its application to people of different means. Quality of life arguments thus essentially have no grounding because they are based entirely on a discourse of social privilege. As the President Thomas Jefferson once said, “There is nothing more unequal, than the equal treatment of unequal people.”

Throughout this paper, I have made references to both property and law, but have yet to discuss the intersection of these two things in regard to homelessness. Waldron explains the issue as thus:

“Homelessness is partly about property and law, and freedom provides the connecting term that makes those categories relevant. By considering not only what a

⁸⁷ As quoted in Waldron, *Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom*, 313. Author’s translation.

person is allowed to do, but where he is allowed to do it, we can see a system of property for what it is: rules that provide freedom and prosperity for some by imposing restrictions on others.”⁸⁸

Freedom, so carefully avoided in the national debate on homeless rights of access and survival, is critical. Expanding on this conversation on freedom, Waldron insists that one must examine the issue as a matter of *negative* freedom, which is “freedom from obstructions such as someone else’s forceful effort to prevent one from doing something. In exactly this negative sense (absence of forcible interference), the homeless person is unfree to be in any place governed by a private property rule.”⁸⁹ So while some may argue that the homeless are as free as housed persons to perform the same actions in everyday life, they are expressly limited in their means, power, and ability to exercise this “freedom.” In other words, we have found a loophole in the system that allows us to rob and violate people of their rights without seeming to do anything wrong. What stands in their way, then, is “the likelihood that someone else will forcibly prevent their action.”⁹⁰

How we determine this freedom has been based on property for the last several centuries, but the modern twenty-first century rhetoric of social equality belies its continued application to American society. Property grants people privileges and rights that should be guaranteed to everyone regardless of such status. “For property, of course, is the embodiment of alienation, an embodied alienation backed up by violence.”⁹¹ Without property, or legal access to it, the homeless essentially have nothing. This fact is made even distressingly clearer as cities continue to pass ordinances that permit the seizure and disposal of homeless individuals’ property in direct violation of the Fourth Amendment. Relying on a victim-blaming discourse of choice, city governments frequently get away with blatant destruction of property. This cultural attitude goes back to the socially reinforced idea that one’s possession of property and/or access to private space is reflective of your social standing.

⁸⁸ Waldron, Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom, 323-324.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁹¹ Mitchell, *The Right to the City*, 19.

This connection is due in part to the idea that citizenship is contingent on capital potential. Given their condition, “People without property therefore have no claim on the polity or on the right to be on the property of citizens; they exist and inhabit property at the sufferance of the morally upright citizenry.”⁹² As we rob the homeless of their identities as citizens, we can more easily restrict their freedom without impinging on our own consciences.

Taking these factors into consideration, I come to a question asked very often in urban discourse: whose right to the city is it anyway? The concept of the Right to the City was formulated by Henri Lefebvre in 1960s Paris as urban revolutions were taking place in both Europe and the United States. References to this movement rely on its definition of the right to the city as a “cry and demand” for the right to remake the city in the image that people want it. Though adopted in modern times as a cry for social equality, it originally embodied a message of social inclusion in the public sphere and collective meaning-making. I turn to Peter Marcuse’s analysis to articulate how I would define the right to the city in terms of the homelessness issue:

“I would reformulate them [Lefebvre’s demands] to be an exigent demand by those deprived of basic material and legal rights, and an aspiration for the future by those discontented with life as they see it around them and perceived as limiting their potentials for growth and creativity.

The demand comes from those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, the persecuted on gender, religious, racial grounds. It is a demand of those whose work injures their health, those whose income is below subsistence, those excluded from the benefits of urban life.”⁹³

A cry for these demands would doubtlessly face harsh criticism and challenge by those would perpetuate homelessness through both structural and individual means. However, this would not be a call for utter social redistribution. This declaration seeks to address the needs of the heavily oppressed and destitute over the needs of the privileged. Of course, for everyone to gain their right

⁹² Staeheli and Mitchell, *Don’t Talk with Strangers*, 539.

⁹³ Marcuse, Peter. “Whose right(s) to what city?” In *Cities for People, Not for Profit*, edited by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer, 24-41. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 30-31.

to the city would necessitate the loss of power by some. “In the long run, winning the right to the city for all may be a win-win game for all, but in the shorter run it will involve conflict, many winners, but also some losers. To pretend otherwise is deceptive and strategically misleading.”⁹⁴

What we should concern ourselves with, however, is again how the needs of the most oppressed and alienated can be met even at the cost of some of the luxury afforded to the higher echelons of society. Amster thus chastises us: “In the end, it appears the City has forgotten that diversity includes the homeless; that ‘public space’ is essential and carries rights of access for all; and that ‘compassion’ is not equivalent to enabling but is about treating people with respect and helping to restore their dignity.”⁹⁵

Keeping this mentality, I can now examine how and why the exclusion of homeless populations is part of a broader social understanding of public space and the public sphere. Beginning with the issue of space, I have touched upon how private forces have come to dominate public spaces and regulate who accesses them. However, the aversion to homeless bodies goes deeper than just an entrepreneurial desire to draw in customers. Public space has always been hotly contested, both historically and today. Reflecting our societal fear of strangers and outsiders, “Public space engenders fears, fears that derive from the sense of public space as uncontrolled space, as a space in which civilization is exceptionally fragile.”⁹⁶ Therefore, despite the ideological definition of public space, we still cannot fully come to accept that nobody can be banned from that space in a democratic society without committing some act or crime that warrants exclusion. Some, such as Ellickson, would argue that the homeless constitute such a deserving population, but I think that I have demonstrated how the social prejudice inherent in anti-homeless legislation and discrimination

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁵ Amster, *Lost in Space*, 27.

⁹⁶ Mitchell, *The Right to the City*, 13.

does not truly justify these measures. Perhaps it is time, rather, to challenge our fear of public-ness and not the people who live in it every day.

Harvey makes another connection back to neoliberalism and the ideological constructions of spaces that the urban landscape now embodies. “This is a world in which the neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism, and its cognate of political withdrawal from collective forms of action, becomes the template for human socialization.”⁹⁷ We no longer envision urban spaces as collective. Our minds have become so used to this individualist way of thinking that we automatically disregard the commonality of space, both in function and symbolic meaning, and simply entertain thoughts of who has the right to that space. Almost without thinking, we consider space available for only those people with enough money to afford the access to it, either through direct ownership or conformity to social conventions. In this way, the privileged enforce this limited access almost for the sake of exclusivity itself.

While public and private spheres are terms used to differentiate between the domestic, familial sphere and the outside world, the “public sphere” in its Habermasian definition “designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.”⁹⁸ In this sense, I refer not to a distinction between public and private, but rather to the societal exchange of discourse and ideas. Using a traditional Habermasian conception of the public sphere, however, is insufficient because utilizing a framework based on a singular arena of bourgeois discourse neglects marginalized voices. We must reconceptualize the term so that it reflects the engagements, conflicts, and negotiations between and within a multiplicity of public arenas. Given the historic and contemporary exclusion of the homeless, we can see that they are barred almost entirely from the discourses and interactions that define “public-ness” on a societal level. Therefore,

⁹⁷ Harvey, *The Right to the City*, 32.

⁹⁸ Frasier, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 110.

I borrow a term from Nancy Frasier in referring to the subordinated populations of homeless individuals as a *subaltern counterpublic*, meaning that “they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”⁹⁹

By identifying homeless populations as their own publics, I not only can acknowledge the agency of these individuals, but also express how they have agency and discourse as a collective. For instance, Amster identifies social networks amongst the homeless in Tempe, AZ, as essential to living on the streets,¹⁰⁰ while Mitchell and Heynen point out that such strategies of community constitute a part of the geography of survival.¹⁰¹ The homeless are far from a monolithic entity, especially given the hardships that these people endure daily, but they do form some version of a “public,” or perhaps multiple publics. As people who live their lives out in the public eye, it only makes sense that they would. However, we need to work on bringing these homeless publics into the mainstream. It is not enough that they engage with each other, creating their own communities through their shared experience, they must also be allowed to engage with their housed counterparts.

As we continue to shut down the public sphere and limit our engagement not only with other people but also with the very concept of *difference*, we erode our ability to sympathize or empathize with our fellow human beings, especially those who are less fortunate. It is in these heterogeneous spaces that direct human-to-human contact can break down social misconceptions and socially produced fears. The transformation of cities into spaces of entrepreneurialism and consumption limits these interactions, reinforces these negative social labels and relationships, and

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Amster, *Lost in Space*.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell and Heynen, *The Geography of Survival*.

makes solutions to homelessness more impossible even as it makes the situation worse. Kohn summarizes the problem as such:

“The ‘harm’ of discomfort might also be a benefit, the benefit of becoming better informed about existing social conditions. This knowledge might make one a more informed citizen, better able to evaluate priorities on government programs. If a voter has never seen a homeless person urinate in the park, it is unlikely that she would recognize the necessity of using tax money to provide public toilets.”¹⁰²

By systematically denying the homeless the ability to interact with the housed majority of society, we limit their ability to teach us and show us the results of our lauded system of inequality. We not only rob them of their own rights, we also rob them of the chance to inspire empathy or to educate us. Someone can read newspaper articles day after day that describe the plight of the homeless, but until they interact with such a person and viscerally engage with the reality of that lived experience, their experience is far from complete. Physical encounters and exchanges are what we need in our to craft a stronger ethos of shared humanity with these people and work towards amending a fractured society.

In the end, we ultimately hurt ourselves as well, if not to the same extent. Escalating our regulation of public spaces for the sake of excluding an undesirable population leaves everyone more restricted in their range of activity, in their ability to experience difference and venture beyond the limited socio-spatial imagination of their surroundings. As neoliberal urbanism reshapes our cities and our lives within them, the public sphere of engagement and conflict is lessened. Sadly, “urban space loses some of its essential elements, but especially its most important characteristic – the possibility of unexpected, unplanned encounters and interactions.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 171.

¹⁰³ Schmid, *Henri Lefebvre*, 57.

Chapter Four

New York City: Homeless Policies, Geographies, and Solutions

“This year the number of homeless people sleeping each night in the New York City shelter system surpassed 50,000 people for the first time since modern homelessness emerged three decades ago. That grim milestone includes more than 21,000 homeless children. More children and adults are homeless now in New York City than at any time since the Great Depression.”

In their State of the Homeless 2013 report, the Coalition for the Homeless opens with this revealing statistic about homelessness in New York City.¹⁰⁴ Having discussed the condition of homelessness and its relationship to urban spaces on a general level, I would now like to apply my arguments developed in the first three chapters to a particular urban location. Given my proximity and familiarity with New York City, I chose this city as a site for historical interrogation, policy review, and potential for change. Paradigmatic in many ways, it has historically been a city of interest when it comes to homeless populations and urban policies on how to deal with them. Until the political and economic forces of the city sought to remake it into a symbol of tourism and wonder, it carried a reputation for being unsafe and disorderly, an identity created in part by the visually significant homeless populations that moved through its streets and parks. First, I examine current and past policy decisions concerning homelessness and consider how the re-envisioned self-identity of New York and its governance has affected its actions on this front. Second, I selectively describe geographic elements of inclusion/exclusion within the city. Third, I will discuss local homeless resistance and the value of such movements in effecting change and bringing voice to the oppressed.

¹⁰⁴ Markee, Patrick. “State of the Homeless 2013.” Coalition for the Homeless, March 5, 2013. Accessed March 26, 2013, 1. http://coalhome.3cdn.net/5029926c66cd17b044_0sm6btn4k.pdf.

Last, I will outline a few key policy recommendations to address the needs and demands of the homeless population.

As the homeless population began to rise once more in the 1970s, efforts were made in New York City to address the social epidemic before it became overwhelming. While cutbacks in human services, especially under the Reagan Administration, generally exacerbated the problem of homelessness, “the retreat from social welfare monies ushered in a new period in which homeless advocates used the legal system to mandate certain services for the poor (most specifically, shelter) that the government had stopped providing.”¹⁰⁵ In the landmark *Callaban v. Carey* case, New York became the first and only U.S. city that “must provide clean and safe shelter to every man who seeks it,”¹⁰⁶ though women were problematically excluded in the class action lawsuit. At the time, at least, women and children made up a much smaller percentage of individuals seeking shelter in New York than they do now. Mandated by the court to accommodate the (male) homeless population, the city and state governments began to build new shelters, though they often placed them in disreputable areas where the middle and upper classes would not have to deal with the people coming in and out of them. Like in the contemporary urban landscape, we see patterns of containment. Decades of conflict over shelter placement haunted the city as proposals to open any sort of shelter or treatment facility often elicit strong community responses. The sentiment of NIMBYism (Not in My Back Yard) made it difficult for shelters to open up in many places, but the City finally “approved the concept of ‘fair-share’ planning in 1989 and enacted the policies on July 1, 1991”¹⁰⁷ to make the distribution of shelter facilities at least marginally more equitable. Shelter location continues to be a

¹⁰⁵ Gaber, Sharon Lord. “From NIMBY to Fair Share: The Development of New York City’s Municipal Shelter Siting Policies, 1980-1990.” In *Urban Geography* 17, no. 4. (1996): 298.

¹⁰⁶ Herman, Robin. “Pact Requires City to Shelter Homeless Men.” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1981. Accessed March 13, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/27/nyregion/pact-requires-city-to-shelter-homeless-men.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁰⁷ Gaber, From NIMBY to Fair Share, 309-310.

contentious issue, reflecting the general social reluctance to share residential and commercial space with the needy.

Successive mayoral administrations generally maintained similar attitudes and levels of attention on this issue, but Mayor Rudy Giuliani drastically departed from this convention during the 1990s. His forcible, authoritative attitude towards reducing crime in New York soon bled over into his stance on the homeless and their right to space. In 1999, he attempted to implement twin policies of requiring the homeless to work or be excluded from shelters, and arresting homeless people sleeping on the streets who refused to be taken to shelter. This latter policy, aimed at swift removal and containment, valorized the ideals of private property as the state sought to drive away these “trespassers” well before the owners ever attempted to remove them. In addition, the city government “started a legal battle against the Callahan v. Carey decision, trying to establish regulations under which DHS staff could deny or terminate shelter for homeless adults if they didn't follow rules and social-service plans.”¹⁰⁸ The Giuliani administration would be the first, but not the last, to seek amendment to the all-inclusive shelter policy secured in 1981.

Writing at the time, Alan Whyte observes that “In Giuliani they have found one of the crudest defenders of big business, a politician who criminalizes the poor and seeks to stamp out all forms of social protest.”¹⁰⁹ Given his statement, “There were times in which we romanticized this to such an extent that we invited people to do it [stay in shelters],”¹¹⁰ I cannot disagree with Mr. Whyte. Giuliani's prolonged legal battle with Housing Works over a 1997 funding dispute only

¹⁰⁸ Jeantet, Diane. “As Homeless Numbers Rose, Clashes Over Policies.” *City Limits*, March 11, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2013. <http://www.citylimits.org/news/articles/4758/as-homeless-numbers-rose-clashes-over-policies#.UXDbTSvwJLw>

¹⁰⁹ Whyte, Alan. “Thousands rally in defense of the homeless in New York.” *World Socialist Web Site*, December 9, 1999. Accessed April 6, 2013. <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/1999/12/nyc-d09.html>.

¹¹⁰ Bumiller, Elisabeth. “In Wake of Attack, Giuliani Cracks Down on Homeless.” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1999. Accessed April 7, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/20/nyregion/in-wake-of-attack-giuliani-cracks-down-on-homeless.html>

further exemplifies his elitist, uncharitable attitude.¹¹¹ I do not mean to overly criminalize Giuliani or his administration, but I would argue that he represented one of the most “entrepreneurial” mayoral reigns of New York, with all that the term implies.

Assuming office in 2002, Mayor Bloomberg soon went into conversations with homeless prevention officials, eventually producing a 40-page document, *Uniting Beyond Shelter: The Action Plan for New York City*, which detailed a nine-point strategy to be implemented over the following five years.¹¹² Beginning with resounding success, the comprehensive plan included a pilot homeless prevention program, a goal of 65,000 affordable housing units over 5 years (increased to 165,000 units over 10 years in 2006), and support for community-based organizations working with chronically homeless New Yorkers who did not use the shelter system. Though his numbers could likely be off, “Between 2005 and 2009, the [street homeless] population was cut by nearly half, decreasing from 4,395 to 2,328 individuals.”¹¹³ Unfortunately, the economic recession of 2008 would set the plan back significantly, eventually grinding it to a halt as the homelessness crisis exploded. Having already in 2002 amended the requirements set forth by *Callahan v. Carey* to provide shelter for *all*,¹¹⁴ Bloomberg thus began to systematically erode the policy of accepting all those in need. Since 2011, the mayor has faced legal battles over implementing tighter restrictions on who can enter homeless shelters and how long they can stay. In February 2013, a state appeals court finally ruled that “the way New York City enacted a policy requiring homeless adults to prove that they had no alternative housing before being allowed into shelters was illegal.”¹¹⁵ With the record

¹¹¹ Dwyer, Jim. “City to Pay AIDS Group in Settlement.” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2005. Accessed April 6, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/27/nyregion/27settlement.html?_r=0

¹¹² Jeantet, Diane. “Bloomberg’s Homeless Plan Was Incredibly Ambitious.” *City Limits*, March 11, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.citylimits.org/news/articles/4756/bloomberg-s-homeless-plan-was-incredibly-ambitious#.UXDbPivwJLw>.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Jeantet, As Homeless Numbers Rose.

¹¹⁵ Santora, Marc. “City Eligibility Policy for Homeless People Seeking Shelter Was Enacted Illegally, Court Says.” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/nyregion/city-enacted-new-homeless-shelter-policy-illegally-court-says.html>.

high increases in the homeless populations and the rising demand for shelters, it has understandably become a matter of space and financial feasibility. However, it seems as if Bloomberg has continued to stall on other fronts of dealing with his city's homelessness problems, particularly in his refusal to use federal money in the creation of affordable housing.

Not only do Bloomberg's recent policies reflect the underlying issues of social division, individual blame, and dehumanization, his personal attitude does as well. In one of his weekly radio addresses, he stated, "You can arrive in your private jet at Kennedy Airport, take a private limousine and go straight to the shelter system, walk in the door and we've got to give you shelter."¹¹⁶ This statement is not only absurd given the uncomfortable, highly regulated shelter experience; it is also dangerous. Bloomberg is expressing a revealing callousness towards the homeless individuals who live in his city by making the case that many people prefer the shelter system to living on their own or even paying for a hotel room. The *New York Post* article, "Thank you very mooch, NYC!" presents a similarly shocking story. One interviewee is quoted as saying, "Everyone in this place has a silver spoon in their mouth,"¹¹⁷ while others claim that they are well-fed on three to four meals per day and even receive a prepaid cellphone. If the descriptions of these supposedly "four-star" accommodations were not suspicious enough, however, the claim that there's no limit to shelter stays pushes it out of the realm of reality. With his proposed policy changes over the past several years, it is unlikely that Bloomberg will change his tune during the last stretch of his mayoral term. However, "the next mayor has the opportunity to embrace proven solutions that will not only reduce the number of homeless children and adults languishing in shelters, but save millions of taxpayer dollars spent on a costly and growing municipal shelter system."¹¹⁸ Perhaps more efficient

¹¹⁶ As quoted in Sauchelli, Dana, and Dan Macleod. "Thank you very mooch, NYC!" *New York Post*, April 1, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2013, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/thank_you_very_mooch_nyc_Pkq1Mu9t1Svh7u9jZDAf5N.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Markee, *State of the Homeless 2012*, 2.

and less discriminatory policies will finally be put into place in the upcoming years, especially if the next mayor of New York is more willing to work with not-for-profit organizations that care about these people.

With an average of 50,135 homeless people sleeping each night in the municipal shelter system, up 19% from last year, there is a significant strain on the institutional services meant to provide aid. Of course, even tracking the sheltered homeless population only provides some of the information necessary to understand how immense the issue of homelessness is in a city. Given the flaws inherent to counting methodologies as well as the refusal by some to enter into the shelter system, there are significant numbers of unsheltered homeless people living in the city, many of whom are chronically homeless and/or have disabilities. Even the Coalition for the Homeless asserts that there is no accurate measurement for the unsheltered homeless population and that City surveys most likely significantly underestimate how many of them live on the streets.¹¹⁹

Despite the mandate of *Callaban v. Carey*, there continue to be serious issues of accessibility when it comes to homeless shelters. Despite all declarations of charitable access to all, New York City makes the shelter system difficult to navigate. In addition, a strict definition of “needy” allows for a rigorous application process that often excludes individuals and families who are found to have alternative housing. People who have been through the application process and denied shelter once before can continuously be denied on that basis. These factors would explain why there continue to be thousands of New Yorkers sleeping on the streets every night instead of in a bed. Of course, there are other issues with shelters, particularly in how autocratic they are; admittedly, some people choose to stay away from them. For many, they are places of last resort and dangerous to one’s body as well as self-respect.¹²⁰ Because of this, I argue that the rhetoric of equal access is a dangerous one

¹¹⁹ Coalition for the Homeless. “New York City Homelessness: The Basic Facts.” Accessed January 12, 2013, <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city>.

¹²⁰ Wright, *Out of Place*, 217.

for New York to propagate when it does little to ensure that the shelter system is a respectful resource that is openly available for all needy New Yorkers, not just those deemed in need. The city has no right to critique the survival strategies of homeless on the street when they in fact do not provide an egalitarian system of aid.

Though many of the actual government policies directly aimed at addressing homelessness are shelter-related, the homeless person's geography of survival in New York City goes beyond those constitutional nodes. Historically the homeless have relied on parks and other public spaces for use both during the day and at night, though their prolonged presence has often rendered these areas unsafe in the eyes of the middle and upper classes. Interestingly, despite the best efforts of gentrifiers and developers to remove the homeless from New York's central business district, the Coalition for the Homeless states that "surveys show that nearly 60 percent of New York City's unsheltered homeless population is in Manhattan."¹²¹ Though not necessarily hostile to homeless panhandlers and wanderers, BIDs and other public benefit corporations do little good for the downtrodden of society. "Rather than reducing crime, poverty, and homelessness, they shift these problems to other less affluent, less organized neighborhoods."¹²² Of course, sympathy only means so much when the business owners are saying "just not here." Remaking traditionally seedy public spaces, such as Times Square and Central Park, has become a trend of the newly entrepreneurial New York City as they attempt to drive away the homeless and make way for wealthier residents and tourists. It is the current social-spatial imaginaries of these types of urban spaces that I want to examine, particularly in how the homeless fit, and do not fit, into them.

Times Square is an interesting example, especially given its very recent transformation. "As long as there have been homeless people sleeping in Times Square, there have been social workers

¹²¹ Coalition for the Homeless, Basic Facts.

¹²² Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 157.

and city officials trying to persuade them to leave.”¹²³ Subject to massive redevelopment in the 1990s, the Theatre District of Manhattan has been “revived” per se in order to draw in tourists and symbolize the grandeur and supremacy of this global metropolis. Lights flash constantly, both by design and by city ordinance, and practically overwhelm the traveler as they walk through the bowtie-shaped public space. Characters from movies move about and pose for pictures with people, but more often than not simply offend people’s social anxieties. It is a space with multidimensional functions, including transit, recreation, consumption, and work. Police and security are also stationed at various points, ready to handle any situation that might arise as well as regulate who can and cannot be in the area.

In my own experiences with Times Square, I have generally noticed a few homeless men walking about with sandwich board signs asking for money. While I do not fully understand their relationship to the police who regulate the area, I can only imagine that it is not the most beneficial to the men panhandling. Nevertheless, it seems as if there is some kind of exception made, at least temporarily, for those who brave the crowds and the lights and seek aid from the tourists. Uncertain of why this is, I uncomfortably recall Amster’s description of Tempe, Arizona, and how some homeless people were allowed to linger in the downtown public area because their presence made it a more “realistic” experience for the visiting shopper.¹²⁴ Perhaps it is to “enrich” the experience of the NYC tourists that these homeless individuals are permitted access, once again privileging the wants and desires of the middle and upper classes. While there might be some benefit to the homeless in this particular case, these moments of inclusivity are possibly only meant to enrich the authenticity of the (gentrified) urban experience. On the other hand, perhaps there is some acknowledgment that the homeless and needy have a right to engage in public encounters there. I

¹²³ Bosman, Julie. “Times Square’s Homeless Holdout, Not Budging.” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2010. Accessed April 14, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/30/nyregion/30heavy.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹²⁴ Amster, *Lost in Space*.

optimistically have some hope that, despite the general sense of exclusivity of the Disneyfied tourist area, there is a sense that even the destitute of New York have a right to be there.

The most recent time I visited the area, I did not notice any persons with signs asking for help because they were a veteran, or disabled, or homeless. I did, however, see one man with one sign. Dressed in clean clothing, decently groomed, and smiling only twenty yards from the policemen sitting on horses, this man proudly brandished his sign that read: “PLEASE HELP, NEED MONEY FOR WEED.” Expressing his intention to purchase an illegal substance and seemingly harassing people for money, this man nevertheless comfortably fit into socio-spatial imaginary of Times Square. He was part of the spectacle, permitted to stand there as part of the urban experience. He was doing the exact same things that homeless individuals do, but as a joke and not for survival. Yet, because of his acceptable appearance and lack of demonstrated, genuine need, he was allowed there; he did not necessarily violate the expectations of appearance and acceptable “public-ness” of his behavior. Though the area still attracts panhandlers, they are always highly subject to the watchful gaze of the NYPD and the security employees of the Times Square Alliance.¹²⁵

Margaret Kohn’s discussion of Battery Park City presents another interesting case as it is exemplary of the contemporary “pseudo-public” space that has become dominant in the gentrifying fabric of New York. Despite the “disreputable” character of the directly adjacent Historic Battery Park, where the homeless still wander and sleep, BPC is highly surveilled and regulated. It is promoted as a civic space rather than a public one, as it is privately funded and controlled, but its developers admit that it is essentially a profit driver for property sales. In this sense, “Public or civic space will never seem like a rational choice from this perspective for the simple reason that such space does not generate a profit. Its benefits cannot easily be calculated in terms of dollars and

¹²⁵ Bosman, Times Square’s Homeless Holdout.

cents.”¹²⁶ There are no homeless people here as the area is carefully monitored by employees of the Battery Park City Authority, which Kohn describes as a city within a city with its own rules and regulations. “If someone tried to lie down on one of the benches or caused other patrons to feel uncomfortable, that person would be asked to leave.”¹²⁷ However, it likely depends on *who* was made to feel uncomfortable and what power they hold in relation to the park; even a poorly dressed tourist could spark sentiments of social division were they to act in a way to violate the expected norms of the space. In this case, Battery Park City provides a clear example of how gentrifying public spaces creates pockets of exclusion not only for the homeless, but for the greater public as well.

Even with its comparatively liberal policies on homelessness and homeless aid, New York City has a long way to go. In terms of equal access, the residents and policymakers of the city continue to isolate and disperse the homeless by closing shelters or at least making them relatively inaccessible to the people who need them. This tendency to hide shelters, close them, or make them unwelcoming surprises me because nobody except someone without alternative housing is going to seek them out. Policies of exclusion have been codified and enforced for decades, with little sign that they might stop soon. In my own research on the municipal shelter system, I found it absolutely impossible to discover a comprehensive list that covered even a significant fraction of total shelter names or locations. It was only in a singular *New York Times* article that I found a recent number: 228. Briefly touring an area of Harlem, I also attempted to locate six shelters in a small, 2-mile area, but only managed to locate one that visibly identified itself as a shelter.

In his discussion on the Right to the City, Harvey reflects back on neoliberal urbanism and how New York City follows this profit-driven entrepreneurial model:

¹²⁶ Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 155.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

“In New York City, for example, the billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, is reshaping the city along lines favourable to developers, Wall Street and transnational capitalist-class elements, and promoting the city as an optimal location for high-value of businesses and a fantastic destination for tourists. He is, in effect, turning Manhattan into one vast gated community for the rich”¹²⁸

Regardless of any self-congratulatory discourse these policymakers want to preach, this reality cannot be ignored. As Manhattan, and ultimately all of NYC, becomes this gentrified gated community, the homeless people who live there will continue to be pushed out. But New York is not powerless to let this happen. Even now, in the midst of Mayor Bloomberg’s tightening shelter restrictions, there are organizations that work towards meeting the needs of the homeless and addressing the structural causes of their condition. The Coalition for the Homeless, to which I have referred often in this chapter, is the oldest not-for-profit advocacy group focused on homelessness in the United States. They not only offer direct services to homeless people, they also have fought several legal battles in the defense of the unhoused. The *Pitt v. Black* case of 1984 is particularly notable because it secured the right for the homeless to register to vote even if they resided in shelters or on the streets.

Another group, Picture the Homeless, is “an organization founded on the principal that in order to end homelessness, people who are homeless must become an organized, effective voice for systemic change.”¹²⁹ Their constituency is made up entirely by homeless persons engaging in discourses on the condition, working towards policy reform, and developing plans of action to help others. Definitely a “subaltern counterpublic,” this organization is based on the idea that homeless persons have agency to control not only their own lives, but also to help shape public discourse and action as well. Common Ground is another advocacy group that works to prevent people from ending up on the streets and to secure housing for those already there. Much of their work goes into providing affordable housing and making sure that individuals and families keep their homes.

¹²⁸ Harvey, *The Right to the City*, 38.

¹²⁹ Picture the Homeless. “About Us.” Accessed April 12, 2013. picturethehomeless.org/about.html.

As it says on the Picture the Homeless website, “It’s not a homelessness crisis – it’s a housing crisis!”¹³⁰ This statement gets to the core of what the Bloomberg administration, and others before it, have seemingly failed to understand: the rising homeless population of New York is not due to laziness or personal failure, but to the structurally oppressive housing market and general economic climate. This paper has admittedly focused on creating more equitable treatment of the homeless in public spaces rather than finding solutions for the homelessness problem, but I believe it is appropriate to now take that further step. The State of the Homeless 2013 report makes three salient recommendations to the city of New York: improve the shelter system so that unsuitable conditions and regulation do not unfairly isolate and further oppress the needy, remove barriers to shelter for individuals and families, and create a more permanent supportive housing solution for the homeless.¹³¹

Efforts have long been underway to establish more homeless prevention and rapid-re-housing programs. These types of service can include rental subsidies, financial assistance for moving costs, security deposits, and utility payments, as well as housing relocation and stabilization services and case management.¹³² In New York in particular, however, the emphasis on providing affordable housing has somehow lost much of its steam. Though considered a leader in the public housing sector, at least in comparison to other cities, New York has a long way to go in reversing its increasingly neoliberal ethic of housing accessibility. Thousands of people identify the lack of affordable housing as the primary cause of their homelessness, a phenomenon supported by studies that show preventative measures to be legitimately effective. Homelessness continues to grow in our nation and in NYC and will continue to tax the municipal social services system until measures are taken to effectively combat it.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Markee, State of the Homeless 2013, 3-4.

¹³² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, AHAR 2010, iv.

If we hope to create a culture of reform that seeks to adequately address the causes of homelessness, I argue that two things need to happen. First, the exclusionary tactics that I outline in the first three chapters must end if we are to allow the homeless to engage with their housed counterparts and establish an ethos of shared humanity. Many scholars and advocates argue that even the most cursory of interactions with the homeless soften harsh attitudes and blaming voices. We need people to let go of their hostility and fear before we can move on to effecting progressive change on a policy level. Second, urban governances must also change the ways in which they conceptualize the state of homelessness within their boundaries. Circulating a discourse of blame only disguises the true root of the problem. Abandoning the dangerous propagandistic ideology of “American dream” meritocracy, we must all accept that not everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. There reaches a point when you have to reach your hand down and simply help them up.

Conclusion

“Rights have to be exercised *somewhere*, and sometimes that ‘where’ has itself to be actively produced by taking, by wresting, some space and transforming both its meaning and its use – by *producing* a space in which rights can exist and be exercised.”¹³³

From beginning to end, I have based many of my arguments and observations in this paper on key premises when it comes to the rights of the homeless. The homeless have a right to survival, a right to the space necessary for that end, and a right to engage in the public sphere as citizen-residents of our cities. Though not necessarily intentional, I find the formation of this list appropriate in its successive demands for a human right, a legal right, and a civic right. Together, these express the multi-dimensional character not only of these people, but of this issue as well. As I conclude my thoughts, I would like to focus on these three ideas and how they come together to illustrate how our current model of society is fractured and insufficient.

The right to survival is not a complicated demand, nor is it difficult to convince people of its validity. Our culture, however, does not hold all human life to an equal standard. Mainstream and right-wing sentiments might assert that we are living in a “post-race society,” but the racism and xenophobia that run rampant in our country help create a discourse that dehumanizes those groups of people that we “Other.” Though most apparent in the circulation of extreme anti-Muslim and anti-Arab ideologies, this dehumanization inherent in Othering reveals itself not only among racial and ethnic lines in this U.S., but also between groups of different sexual, gender, class, and ability identities. Keeping this reality in check, I challenge us to ask again whether society as a whole truly

¹³³ Mitchell, *The Right to the City*, 81.

values the lives of the homeless. It is my hope that I have established in the mind of the reader a glimpse into the humanity of unhoused individuals.

Even with the assumption that the lives of the homeless have worth, that they have a basic human right to survival, the question of their constitutional, legal right to spatial access is a much more contentious debate. While people might admit that the homeless have a right to *live*, they often assert that the homeless cannot live near *them*. They thus rationalize discriminatory anti-homeless ordinances and exclusionary tactics of spatial regulation even though the homeless, by all forms of logic, more desperately need that space for survival. The ensuing struggle over space reinforces the social divisions between the dominating and subordinated groups as the housed seek to push the homeless elsewhere. However, making the “problem” go somewhere else fundamentally does not help solve the problem. Margaret Kohn describes the issue well: “No amount of criminalization or harassment can prevent people from performing activities intrinsic to life itself, although policing strategies certainly can confine the homeless to certain limited zones of the city that are out of sight of the more affluent citizens.”¹³⁴ We set up borders, establishing these inflexible social-spatial imaginaries that seek to instantly communicate who is welcome and who is not. We must now call these borders into question. Active exclusion of the homeless does not help alleviate their condition, it disguises the structural inequality of our capitalist system, and it is ultimately one of the most selfish acts of oppression that one group of people can exert over another.

My last point, on the civic rights of the homeless, is meant to address the fact that they are human beings with the same capacity for emotions, desires, ideas, and actions as every housed person in society. “People remain agents, with ideas and initiatives of their own, even when they are poor.”¹³⁵ Expelling the physical bodies of the homeless is heinous enough, but our complete dismissal of their participatory power in creating social discourses is truly astounding. Attaching

¹³⁴ Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods*, 167.

¹³⁵ Waldron, Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom, 303.

labels of disgust and shame to these people, or sometimes just rendering them completely invisible, we systematically reinforce the idea that they are unworthy and that their voices are useless. As we continue to shut down the public sphere and limit our engagement not only with each other, but also with the very idea of *difference*, we erode our ability to empathize with fellow human beings who have less than us. In many ways, our social divisions come down to a matter of possessions and how we allow that to influence our conception of others. Cities have traditionally challenged this mode of thinking by establishing heterogeneous spaces where human-to-human contact can break down social misconceptions and socially produced fears. The transformation of cities into spaces of entrepreneurialism and consumption limits these interactions, reinforces these unfortunate social labels and relationships, and makes solutions to homelessness more impossible even as it makes the condition more widespread. Though my focus here is on the rights of the homeless, it is clear to me that our mistreatment of this minority population has a more pervasive negative effect on the rest of society. We should open up our spaces not only for the survival of a structurally oppressed group of people, but also for the sake of creating a humanized and humanizing society.

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