

Book Review

Willse, C. (2015). *The value of homelessness: Managing surplus life in the United States*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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Craig Willse, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of cultural studies at George Mason University. He earned his Ph.D. in sociology from the CUNY Graduate Center. He has published in the areas of neoliberalism, urbanism, biopolitics and racial formations. His academic work is informed by his political activism.

The introduction begins with a history of how the author became involved in issues of homelessness. It, then discusses poststructuralist method especially diagrammatic method, which the author intends to use to examine current approaches to homelessness and how homeless programs fit neoliberal economics and governance.

The first chapter, titled “Surplus Life, or Race and Death in Neoliberal Times” establishes the impact of housing insecurity on life chances. The chapter reviews several studies that indicate that homelessness shortens life expectancy. Using Foucault’s concept of “biopower,” it argues that although biopower seeks to enhance life and productivity, it also serves to identify “surplus” life. There is a clear separation between those who are housed and those who are not. The chapter further establishes that housing arrangements reflect the racialized nature of the society, being biased against both Afro-descended and Native American populations. It argues that the welfare state in the U. S. embeds control of labor and state racism. In the author’s eyes, the “welfare state has become, “...competitive neoliberal industries of population management (p.51).”

Chapter Two, “Homelessness as Method” is an indictment of social science method. The author claims that method embeds white values and supports white governance. The chapter reviews recent studies of homeless populations to demonstrate how they embed white values, turn homeless people into a population to be managed and support the need for governance. The chapter concludes with the following:

Through white logic and white methods, the racialized order is reordered, as homelessness as a condition of blackness is naturalized, and the pathologization of black people resecured through narrativized overcoming. Governance too is granted once again its whiteness, in defense of white entitlement to the city—to feelings of safety, to bourgeois conceptions of community and cleanliness, to a naturalized order that in its circulation does violence to those designated as disorder. And finally, the ethical place of social science is resecured once again, in the role of documenting and governing within the existing social order. (p.80)

The author argues in the next chapter, “From Pathology to Population, that splitting the state between federal and subnational units has served to secure “...heteropatriarchal arrangements of labor and family along with the subordination of internally colonized populations” (p.81). The chapter explains how the neo-liberal method of gover-

nance uses funding and regulation to maintain control of services while decentralizing service. It further explains how the Community Mental Health Act led to increases in those living without shelter.

In Chapter Four, "Governing through Numbers," Willse examines Congress's mandate to collect data on the extent of homelessness. This led to the development of the homeless management information systems approach. He further argues that the information system does not just gather data, but shapes responses to the homeless. The system is based upon universal data elements that force providers to classify people in defined ways.

The development of the concept of "chronic homelessness" and how responses to this issue have changed the delivery of service to this population is discussed in Chapter Five, "The Invention of Chronic Homelessness". In the traditional model, people needed case management, and in essence, had to earn their way to housing. In the new approach, people are housed, then helped to deal with other issues. Basically, it is a harm reduction

approach. The author points out that this is a "neoliberal post-social" approach, which is primarily driven and defended on economic arguments. In many ways, the goal is not necessarily to help homeless people, but to facilitate economic growth and tourist economies.

In the final chapter, titled "Surplus Life at the Limits of the Good," the author pulls the various arguments together to establish that homelessness helps to maintain the racial structure in the United States and that current approaches further maintain the racial structure, clearly disadvantaging non-European segments of the population.

I found this to be an important book. I recommend that all social work faculty read it. It clearly demonstrates how neoliberal management approaches maintain racial inequality, while appearing to address social problems. It certainly fits social work's social justice agenda. Because it is written in post-structural sociology terms, I would not use it with undergraduates. I suspect they would not understand the jargon or the methodology.