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Arapoglou, V. and Gounis, K. (2017)

Contested Landscapes of Poverty and Homelessness in Southern Europe: Reflections from Athens

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There is a genre of academic books around homelessness practice and theory that reproduces what I have called, paraphrasing Foucault, the 'economy of homelessness': a set of discourses and practices around a specific subject domain that are concerned with sustaining its status above everything else. The field proliferates with texts written with the implicit aim of maintaining the status quo of the writer, reproducing the domain of knowledge that a group has constituted thanks to their dominant position (as academics, practitioners, policy-makers: in a word, as 'experts'). The 'economy of homelessness' functions as a machine designing institutions, modes of being, modes of understandings, and ultimately governmentalities, which then constitute subjects as functions of particular framings of deviancy: in this case, the 'home-less' who requires 'solutions'. Papers and books; conferences and policy briefs; reports and media reportage; are written and circulated without questioning the basis upon which the bare idea of 'homelessness' is possible to start with. It is as if we can't do without it, and we are therefore constrained to play within the confines of a repetitive fugue that offers no solutions, and never changes key, ringing monotonous on a single traumatic tune.

Contested landscapes of poverty and homelessness in Southern Europe does not openly challenge the 'economy of homelessness': that is not what the book is about. At the same time, the book does not simply reproduce the dominant, uncritical discourse. Arapoglou and Gounis do something subtler with this project – or at least this is how I read it. It seems to me that they *work the middle ground*: on the one hand producing an account that it is situated within an established tradition of thought and modes of knowledge production, while on the other hand offering a number of insights in their analysis that begin to challenge the assumptions that make homelessness a reality. In other words, this is a book that does not take the ground of homelessness in Southern Europe for granted. It shows us how that landscape is constituted and it contests it, providing a much-needed and convincing analysis of the contemporary state of affairs in Greece (the main case study) and beyond.

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A book around homelessness in Southern Europe could easily have been centred on a number of detailed case studies depicting the usual scenario of a failing welfare state, clientelist management, and charitable (religious-oriented) imperatives to 'save' the poor. Although these narratives have the merit of deepening our understanding of specific cases and situations, they usually fail to address the entrenched systemic inequalities that (re)produce homelessness in all its facets. Critically, these systemic failings have nothing to do with any specific geography or way of life, and nor can they be simply reduced to a neoliberal urban logic of accumulation by dispossession. A non-institutionalised and critical scholarship of homelessness is instead able to recognise and trace these systemic processes, and to study them in a way that recognises that they are about both *evolving political urban economies* and *grounded embodied experiences*. It is at the intersection of the two that homelessness emerges as something that cannot be contained by its definitions, but that encompasses and challenges them.

The book of Arapoglou and Gounis does little in terms of this latter ambition, to reflect the embodied experience of homelessness, but it is a fundamental textbook for understanding its political urban economy. It offers an encompassing, well-researched, and convincing account of the ways in which homelessness in Southern Europe is not just the result of failing state apparatuses and declining local economies, but an expression of a number of trans-local neoliberal histories and processes. What the authors offer is a tour de force of analysis that traces a number of interlocking macro- and meso-level processes that assemble the plane upon which the rise of homelessness in Southern Europe takes place. Their accounts include an overview of the ways in which neoliberal economic flows are entering into the arena of policy design and management across the West; an account of the rise in invisible homelessness in the aftermath of the recent economic 'crisis' as solidarity interventions reduced the visibility of homelessness; and a convincing description of the ways that NGO-driven humanitarianism and EU-based emergency measures ultimately converge to create new forms of locally-based austerity politics in post-2008 Greece.

This is a book which analyses the multiple ways in which State governments, private interests, charitable concerns, and humanitarian business combine to produce an elaborate entanglement that cannot be reduced to linear narratives. The book is short, but layered: its main aim, I believe, is to show how the 'landscape' of homelessness in Southern Europe is constantly evolving. The book critiques larger trends of welfare entrenchment, neoliberal project-led "solutions" to poverty management

and ultimately, the criminalisation of the poor. Held together by the tensioned politics running through these processes, the analysis offered by Arapoglou and Gounis is not trapped within the all-encompassing power of capital, but shows how the *landscaping* required to assemble the current status quo of homelessness across the continent is always and unavoidably *contested*. However, this is not only because the process itself is fought by activists groups, solidarity-based interventions, and grassroots politics – all of which figure strongly in the authors' accounts in the volume. Fundamentally, the assemblage of marginal lives in Southern Europe is contested because it is made of contradictory tendencies: an increased but nominal emphasis on cohesion policies at the European level masks the undoing of the already labile welfare state at the national scale; the rise of a specific anti-poverty industry, driven by a lack of State-led responses, shadows the calculative and exclusivist logics of new forms of intervention; the apparent functionalism and efficacy of positivist policy-making effectively de-politicises social issues and reduces our capacity to imagine alternative futures; and so on.

As this might suggest, there are two areas where I think that the book falls short. The first is the lack of any detailed analysis of the lived and embodied experience of homelessness in Southern Europe, or at least in Athens. For a book about the 'landscape' of homelessness, there is too little about the ways in which homeless people themselves experience the overarching processes that the book so eloquently describes. This is not just a problem of grounding, or of providing compelling vignettes. It is instead a more fundamental drawback: without seriously engaging with the felt and lived experience of homelessness, the book fails to grasp the politics of that experience, that is, how people respond to and assemble within the broader processes of which they are part. As a number of recent ethnographic projects concerned with matters of eviction, migration, and housing precarity across the global North and South have illustrated, the politics of urban precarity do not simply follow the aforementioned processes, but also produce alternatives: new modes of being, and new approaches to contesting the status quo (the works of Desmond on evictions in Milwaukee; Simone on the uninhabitable in the urban South; and Giordano on migrants in Southern Italy are all examples). The second area in which I would have liked the authors to say more, and perhaps to dare more, is around the future political landscape of homelessness. What should be done now? Where should we go, and how? The book's final paragraphs contain some indications in this sense, but they do not do justice to the complexity of the issues at stake: if the problem is the wider economic, social, and cultural landscape – as this book so clearly demonstrates – why are we still offered a politics of adjustment rather than a more provocative challenge?

Despite its limitations, this is a much-needed book. It is a comprehensive, rich, well-written critique of the nuanced political economy of homelessness in Southern Europe. If its critique is perhaps insufficiently challenging at times, it nonetheless provides the ground upon which radical alternatives can be conceived and constructed.

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