

Megan Ravenhill. The Culture of Homelessness.
Aldershot:Ashgate, illustrated edition, October
2008, ISBN-10: 0754671909, £52.25.

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Every book with a title including “The Culture of” is immediately associated with Oscar Lewis’ “(sub) Culture of Poverty” and therefore in trouble. The appeal Lewis’ concept offered to US policy makers and decision elites lay in explaining persisting urban problems that just don’t seem to go away, like poverty and homelessness, by describing the poor’s or homeless habits as causal for the situation they find themselves in. Responsibility firmly laid at their door steps (or shelter entrance or curbside) policy makers can assure the public that the poor and homeless are unique in their culture and will always be with us and dole out some charity money.

Megan Ravenhill’s book comes as a pleasant surprise, not despite the title but because the title hints at something and explores thoroughly what had been rather absent in the rich, if erratic anglosaxon literature about homelessness after the *world city paradigm* since the mid-1980ies: The actual agency of homeless persons on their way into, during and out of homelessness plus the role of the “homeless industry” in this process. ROPERS, 1988, WOLCH/DEAR, 1993 and RUDDICK, 1996 looked into this relationship in Southern California and WAGNER, 1993 did the same in New England. Both Ruddick and Wagner had chosen an ethnographic approach but none with the depth and length (1996-2006) of Ravenhill, who accumulated a wealth of data and stories from which she draws her conclusions and recommendations.

After the first couple of chapters which provide an introduction, define her understanding of homelessness as rooflessness, discuss theoretical perspectives and a policy overview and present her research framework the book gains

momentum in chapters six, seven and eight. To avoid misunderstandings: The first five chapters are important because they lay the foundation for what follows.

In chapter six Ravenhills uses actual route-maps to illustrate the process of becoming homeless, which does not happen instantaneously but builds up over (a long) time and is more often than not rooted in early childhood. This complex and long term character of the routes into homelessness renders the current crisis management of the homeless industry futile.

In chapter seven she introduces and analyses the concept of the *homeless culture* without romanticizing it. She discusses various subgroups of this culture and how they help the newly roofless to fit in after the initial culture shock.

Chapter eight describes the exit route out of homelessness and into housing. She argues convincingly that it needs catalysts to start the process and that those homeless trying to move back into housing are immediately faced with all kinds of barriers of access (information, services, benefits, advice etc). She illustrates this process again with route maps.

Ravenhill's book is an important contribution to the understanding of homelessness in Europe. Other than hers I am not aware of any ethnographic study of homelessness outside the US. There are few things left to desire. For once the book would have profited from more editing, there are double brackets and missing ones and it is not always clear what purpose the illustrations are serving. But this is minor as is the excessive use of the word *unique* to describe the book (I stopped counting at eight on the second page). Personally I would have liked to learn more about the *homeless industry*, eg what distinguishes this concept from the time worn and degorative term *poverty pimps*.

A bigger problem and certainly not the fault of the author is the time frame: 1996 - 2006 almost match the Blair administration and the real estate bubble in the UK. It remains to be seen, if the routes into and out of homeless will be affected by the current crisis.

References

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