



Book review: Don Mitchell's 'Mean Streets' (2020)

Patrick Geiger
Clark University

Patrick Geiger is a PhD student at the Clark University Graduate School of Geography where he studies urban geography, racial capitalism, and the criminalization of homelessness.

Contact:
PGeiger@clarku.edu

Abstract

Don Mitchell's latest book represents the culmination of three decades of research on the criminalization of homelessness. Drawing heavily from Marxist urban theory, Mitchell invites readers to consider the relationship between capitalism, homelessness, and public space. I argue Mitchell's analysis is particularly relevant during overlapping socio-economic and public health crises which lay bare the contradictions and abuses of racial capitalism. I call attention to how Mitchell connects struggles over the rights of the unhoused to broader class struggles and his argument for doing 'social' things amidst anti-social and anti-urban state responses to crisis, as well as the importance of articulating the thoroughly racialized nature of homelessness and capitalism more broadly.

Keywords

Homelessness, criminalization, resistance, public space

Over the past three decades, few scholars have been more persistent in calling attention to the criminalization of homelessness in the United States than Don Mitchell. Throughout his work, Mitchell insists that criminalization and other punitive responses to homelessness must be considered alongside the imperatives of capital accumulation and the dynamics of class struggle, particularly as they play out in urban public spaces. In *Mean Streets*, Mitchell updates and revises some of his recent contributions to convey a sustained argument that the unhoused, rather than being an epiphenomenal group, constitute a class under capitalism. Below I elaborate on some of the key points in Mitchell's argument and comment on the ways in which continued efforts to criminalize, displace, and banish unhoused populations amid the pandemic both underscore the relevance of Mitchell's work and give cause for reflecting on expanded notions of resistance.



To begin, Mitchell draws from Marx to argue that unhoused individuals should be considered as part of the ‘industrial reserve army,’ a ‘surplus’ population that is necessarily produced by the capitalist political economy. Such a population is needed for the development of capitalist industry, as Mitchell illustrates with examples from the expansion of agribusiness in California, but it is also a threat. Specifically, the visible presence of unhoused individuals is perceived as a threat to the continued accumulation and circulation of capital through the urban built environment. Criminalization and other efforts to manage unhoused populations stem from this threat (for an alternative Marxist explanation of criminalization see Hennigan, 2019). *Mean Streets* calls into question any notion that the criminalization of homelessness is a *new* phenomenon. Instead, in part one of the book, Mitchell situates criminalization within the long history of regulating labor, protest, and ‘surplus’ populations under capitalism. Mitchell thus draws from a diverse array of examples—from Industrial Workers of the World protests in the early twentieth century to newly planned unhoused camps in cities on the US west coast—to drive home his main point: homelessness is a form of class war. This is not to say that the dynamics of class struggle and criminalization do not evolve, however. As articles from this RHJ special issue on the criminalization of homelessness illustrate and as Mitchell himself details in *Mean Streets*, cities and capital continually adapt in their management of unhoused populations. For example, Mitchell discusses several new legal innovations which alter both geographies of survival and of protest in urban settings. These include new laws criminalizing serving food to unhoused individuals without a permit and court decisions upholding the right of a public housing agency to legally bar individuals from surrounding streets and sidewalks.

A theoretical interlude provides the link between the historical geographical analyses of homelessness in part one and the more contemporary discussions of regulating public space in part two. Mitchell uses Lefebvre’s concepts of abstract space and spatial practice to show how public space becomes enrolled in capitalist political economy and therefore becomes a site of contestation. Under capitalism, there is a drive toward the production of abstract space, or space that is commensurable and exchangeable. However, spatial practices can counteract this drive. This is where Mitchell locates the nexus of homelessness, capitalism, and public space. He notes, ‘the homeless, by their very act of being in public space, differentiate space in ways that are not “intrinsic to economic growth”’ (p. 98). In other words, the occupation of public space by unhoused individuals and other users such as protestors, ‘[sets] a limit to capital and its total conquest of our social spaces and social lives’ (p. 99). It is by making space *social* through spatial practices that we can resist capitalist exploitation and domination. For Mitchell, the law also plays an important role in mediating the extent to which space can be appropriated by public groups and therefore is also a site of class struggle. Mitchell thus should not be read as a Marxist who dismisses the unhoused as the simply *lumpen* (Lancione, 2020). Though *Mean Streets* is not by any means an ethnographic account of resistance and the radical praxis of care, the book emphasizes the imperative of recognizing the practices and sites of unhoused communities as such. This theme has been further explored by scholars who draw from Mitchell’s work (see for example Speer, 2019).

As the wave of protests across the US following the murder of George Floyd demonstrates, public spaces remain key sites in the struggle against racism and oppression for both housed and unhoused people. Far from diminishing the importance of public space, the Covid-19 pandemic has underscored many of Mitchell's arguments. For example, the pandemic laid bare the inadequacies of the shelter system in the United States. In this context, camps became more than a rejection of carceral services, they became public health interventions (albeit equally inadequate ones). And yet, despite guidelines from the CDC which advise against any clearing of camps during the pandemic, cities such as Los Angeles and Washington, DC have recently deployed new programs designed to permanently remove camps from portions of the city (Donovan, 2021; Levin, 2021). The housing components of these new programs can, at best, be described as only partially successful. During this new wave of criminalization, mutual-aid groups have been at the forefront of struggles against displacement and have helped vulnerable communities cope with the pandemic. In other words, while the pandemic has posed profound challenges to our social lives, it has ultimately served to underscore the importance of, to use Mitchell's phrasing, 'doing social things' (p. 151).

That said, there are certain limits to overemphasizing the occupation of public space as a method of resistance. As scholarship from Black Geographies has shown, there exist a myriad of oppositional geographies and practices through which the unhoused and other groups articulate visions for more just futures (Goldfischer, 2018; McKittrick, 2006, 2011). Also, though Mitchell provides an insightful historical geography of homelessness in the United States and acknowledges the racial inequalities that manifest themselves in struggles over housing and criminalization, *Mean Streets* does not account for the thoroughly racialized nature of homelessness (and capitalism more generally). For example, in Washington, DC, long histories of racial capitalism have made it such that a staggering 87 per cent of unhoused residents are Black. Thus, any discussion of criminalization or the regulation of public space must be placed within the context of racial banishment (Roy, 2017). Lastly, Mitchell correctly points out that laws targeting unhoused populations also impact those who are housed. As he notes, 'we are all now potential trespassers, each of us making a claim on another's attention, time, property, and sense of well-being' (p. 154). However, while this sentiment may be politically motivating, it does not account for the ways in which specifically racialized groups become targets of police and other state-sponsored violence (Valdez et al., 2020). This is not to disagree with Mitchell's assertion that the unhoused, writ large, are a group that is targeted by police and the state, but it is to argue for a discussion of criminalization that is more attuned to intersectionality.

Mean Streets offers a powerful account of the history and political economy of homelessness in the United States. Mitchell's insights, particularly regarding social spatial practices, continue to be relevant during the overlapping crises of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such insights are made more powerful through attention to Black geographic thought and other critical epistemologies of power and difference.

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