Commentary

Worlding the geographies of homelessness: Informality, precarity, and theory from the Global South

Jessie Speer (iD)
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract
Millions of people across the world today live without access to safe, stable housing. Geography has contributed greatly to current understandings of homelessness and pushed the broader field of homelessness studies to challenge the unequal power relations embedded in our homes, institutions, and cities. This short reflection presents a brief overview of some key insights of geographical research on homelessness and argues that geography's contributions could be strengthened by taking a more global approach to the problem. Building on the concept of 'worlding', I argue that the discipline can move beyond its focus on European and North American dynamics, broaden its narrow conception of homelessness to include analysis of informality and housing precarity, and engage a more diverse repertoire of theoretical frameworks for understanding the problem.

In an era of increased globalization, transnational processes increasingly shape local dynamics. The scale of the urban is constantly reshaped through finance capital, global flows of real estate investment, and the circulation of planning concepts between cities. Yet analyses of globalization risk reifying the dominance of megacities in the Global North while overlooking the long and complex history of South–South connections and the increasingly global reach of southern models of urbanism (Roy, 2011). Homelessness, like other urban dynamics, can be understood at a global scale. Housing displacement through gentrification can no longer be understood as a local anomaly in the property markets of wealthy cities. As Smith (2002) argued

decades ago, gentrification is an urban strategy deeply embedded in global circuits of capital. Yet homelessness has long been framed in relation to urban and cultural geography, leaving questions of national, regional, and global politics less examined. More importantly, geographical scholarship on homelessness remains dominated by theory that emerges from European and North American contexts.

Corresponding author:
Jessie Speer, London School of Economics and Political Science, Flat 6, Ruskin Park House, London SE5 8TQ, UK.
Email: j.s.speer@lse.ac.uk

The concept of 'worlding' has been used to describe the increasingly global reach of urban politics, particularly in contexts outside of the Global North, as well as the epistemological imperative to challenge uneven geographies of knowledge that privilege Anglophone scholarship. This is not to say that research on homelessness in the Global North is unimportant, but that such work can be framed in a regional context. Inspired by Jazeel's (2016) call for geography to provincialize European and North American theory and engage more deeply with area studies as a discipline, I increasingly frame my own work on U.S. homelessness in relation to American studies rather than universalized urban theory. This shift requires greater sensitivity to connections between and across distinct scales of analysis. In this short reflection, I argue that geography can deepen its attention to the confluence between local, national, regional, and global scales of analysis in the study of homelessness, while also countering the tendency to universalize Euro-American theory.

Much geographical literature on homelessness critiques the production of capitalist space, showing how neoliberal capitalism has produced an increasingly hostile urban landscape that targets people without housing. Another major strand examines cultural geographies of homelessness, drawing on a range of frameworks including theories of race and empire, feminist understandings of domesticity and gendered violence as well as theories of embodiment, affect, and materiality. In the next section, I briefly discuss the contributions of these areas of inquiry, before turning in the final section to informality and precarity as two conceptual starting points for working toward more globally expansive analyses.

Urban and cultural geographies of homelessness: A brief overview

The policing of homelessness is a global problem that impacts world regions in distinct ways. Since the 1980s, cities across every inhabited continent have invested in aggressive arrest campaigns, property sweeps, and hostile architecture designed to prevent people from living in public. These processes are deeply rooted in the rise of neoliberal urban policy and the financialization of property.

As housing becomes a tool through which the capitalist class grows its money, so too do housing costs begin to soar, leading to an inevitable rise in homelessness. At the same time, the capitalist imperative to increase property values creates pressure to remove all that is defined as a blight on the urban landscape, including unhoused people. Different regions have experienced these pressures in distinct ways and at varying historical junctures. Across Latin America, East Asia, and the post-Soviet world, such punitive policies are part and parcel of the rapid shift toward capitalism. Postcolonial states often institute hyper-policing of homelessness under pressure from the IMF and World Bank.

Many states have supported the shift toward financialized property alongside cuts to public welfare. Dramatic underfunding of homelessness services, combined with the problem of NIMBYism, often results in the clustering of services in poor neighborhoods where rents are cheaper and residents lack the political power to object. The ghettoization of homelessness services in turn creates geographies of spatial containment. In the United States, Skid Row neighborhoods are often systematically targeted for racialized hyper-policing, while jails have become the de facto site for homelessness management (Dozier, 2019; Speer, 2018). In Europe and North America, shelters often internalize punitive approaches to poverty, promoting normative and racialized visions of who deserves support (see Lancione, 2016).

The criminalization of homelessness is also deeply rooted in historical legacies of empire, race, and targeted disinvestment. In British settler states, contemporary criminalization of homelessness can be characterized as the entrenched afterlife of colonial-era vagrancy laws. In Australia, colonial assumptions about what constitutes a home have resulted in housing condemnation among Aboriginal communities (Zufferey and Chung, 2015). Across the Americas, Indigenous communities experience higher rates of homelessness. Policies targeting unhoused people in Europe are also profoundly steeped in racial and colonial ideologies that stigmatize transnational migrants, while hostile immigration policy leads to higher rates of migrant homelessness. In Japan, Korean migrants are uniquely vulnerable to homelessness and criminalization (Rusenko, 2020).

Homelessness thus manifests at the intersection of multiple forms of inequality and oppression, including race, nationality, disability, sexuality, and gender. With heightened border security and xenophobic rhetoric in countries across the globe, migration, nationality, and race all profoundly shape the experience of homelessness. The comingling of anti-homeless sentiment with the racist and xenophobic treatment of Black, migrant, and Indigenous groups calls attention to homelessness as a structural problem that is profoundly intersectional. Patriarchal and heteronormative family structures also reproduce housing insecurity. While the family is often a resource that insulates people from the insecurities of the market, it is also a site of violence against women and queer youth. Disability, too, is deeply relevant to the politics of homelessness. While most structural analyses of homelessness in geography focus on the dynamics of the capitalist city, cultural theories of homelessness pay attention to the roles that imperialism, disability, patriarchy, and heteronormativity have played in casting people out of housed society.

Such scholarship also shows a politics of solidarity and care that emerges in the services sector and grass-roots mutual aid as well as highlighting how unhoused people shape the urban landscape. Survival tactics remain remarkably similar across a diverse range of contexts. In the absence of affordable market housing, alternative dwelling spaces require new and creative home-making practices. In-between and left-over urban spaces – underneath highway overpasses or alongside train tracks, for example – enable people to evade surveillance and transform the city to meet their own needs. Abandoned buildings enable squatter communities to develop, and urban green spaces offer crucial sites for material survival and privacy. From India to Brazil and Australia to the United States, geographers have shown how unhoused people work to develop emotional ties with the spaces where they dwell.

Informality, precarity, and theory from the global south

In analyzing the dynamics discussed above, geography largely engages in city-specific studies, divorced from larger regional trends. Where meta-analysis is conducted, it tends to place European or North American realities at the center of the debate. Going forward, a focus on drawing connections between a more diverse set of locations will help geography develop new theoretical frameworks for understanding larger regional dynamics of homelessness. In addition to analyzing how existing studies speak to each other, new relational and comparative analyses can help the discipline move beyond idiosyncratic case studies while also attending to the importance of historical specificity. Such a commitment to transnational and comparative thinking not only challenges methodological nationalism but opens the horizon for solidarity-building between advocates and unhoused people who share similar experiences of displacement, racism, gender violence, and criminalization across locations.

To develop a richer picture of a diverse range of translocal dynamics, geography must expand its engagement with scholarship on homelessness in the Global South. The discipline demands a new commitment to thinking across and between locations in ways that do not universalize European or North American dynamics. This entails both provincializing studies of the United States and Europe while also challenging the unequal landscape of global academic knowledge production.

In addition to building regional analyses of homelessness, it is crucial to research the ways in which homelessness manifests across the Global North/South divide, in particular looking for theoretical concepts from the Global South that have relevance across a range of contexts. Roy (2003) has made important strides in this regard, using theories of housing informality in India to analyze homelessness in the United States. Drawing connections between starkly different contexts requires researchers to interrogate the concept of homelessness itself. Informality and precarity offer two important theories emerging from the Global South that can help shed light on homelessness elsewhere.

In much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, widespread tolerance of informality enables people to engage in makeshift home-making in ways that are impossible in highly formalized urban economies. Beyond creating homelike spaces in public, people without housing often develop entire urban

neighborhoods. A wide range of structures – including those without doors, locks, walls, or roofs – can constitute home for people living in the margins of the city (Meth, 2003). Such dwellings have the potential to challenge market property as the building block of urban development and subvert notions of the isolated nuclear family as the primary model for domesticity. In cities across the Global North, informal housing has emerged as a highly criminalized mode of domesticity, a reality that has remained largely overlooked by planners and policy-makers, as informality is so often assumed to be exclusive to the Global South (Speer, 2016).

Yet despite their challenge to normative domesticity and their power to reshape the city, encampments and informal collectives remain deeply precarious. Self-made housing, whether it takes the form of shack towns, tent encampments, or cardboard boxes tucked under a highway overpass, shares the common condition of being subject to the ever-present possibility of demolition, environmental hazard, and inadequate sanitation. At the same time, those who dwell in such spaces become experts at surviving criminalization, fostering grass-roots leadership, and rebuilding demolished homes. Translocal analyses of these dynamics can help geographers to build more robust theories of the nature of informal housing, and move beyond narrow conceptions of the definition of homelessness towards a broader understanding of informal livelihoods.

Housing precarity offers another flexible conceptual framing for reimagining the problem of homelessness. In many cities in the Global South, large-scale rural-to-urban migration constitutes one of the leading causes of homelessness. Yet because of the enormous and unsettled nature of the problem, accurate census data is nearly impossible to obtain. One of the greatest challenges faced by pavement dwellers in India is the lack of visible citizenship, in the form of access to voter IDs, ration cards, and banking facilities (Roy and Siddique, 2018). In Romania, the concept of homelessness did not exist until foreign aid workers introduced it to the country after the fall of communism (O'Neill, 2010). In such contexts, many unhoused people move between precarious living situations, an experience often illegible to state or social service agencies which tend to employ statistical conceptions of homelessness based on a model of the world as sedentary. Such misconceptions have resulted in the dramatic undercounting of homelessness, downplaying the urgency of the crisis, and impacting the availability of state funding. The umbrella category of housing precarity offers a useful starting point for engaging in a broader analysis. Geography is well-positioned to address the diverse, cyclical, and expansive nature of homelessness to assess the scale and nature of the problem across a diverse range of national contexts. Such a conceptual shift is crucial not only to making homelessness more visible, but to challenging the epistemic erasure of people who experience it.

Altogether, geographers have shown the many ways in which people without market housing face a fundamentally spatial set of problems. Geography reveals the common experience of struggling against criminalization and building alternative domesticities. Going forward, the field can bring insights from urban studies in the Global South to bear on the study of homelessness with the aim of building more complex, robust, and globally relevant frameworks for analysis.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Jessie Speer ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1636-803X

References

Dozier D (2019) Contested development: Homeless property, police reform, and resistance in skid row, LA. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 43(1): 179–194.

Jazeel T (2016) Between area and discipline: Progress, knowledge production and the geographies of

geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 40(5): 649–667.

Lancione M (2016) Racialised dissatisfaction: Homelessness management and the everyday assemblage of difference. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41(4): 363–375.

Meth P (2003) Rethinking the 'domus' in domestic violence: Homelessness, space and domestic violence in South Africa. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences* 34(3): 317–327.

O'Neill B (2010) Down and then out in Bucharest: Urban poverty, governance, and the politics of place in the postsocialist city. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28(2): 254–269.

Roy A (2003) Paradigms of propertied citizenship: Transnational techniques of analysis. *Urban Affairs Review* 38(4): 463–491.

Roy A (2011) Urbanisms, worlding practices and the theory of planning. *Planning Theory* 10(1): 6–15.

Roy A and Siddique G (2018) Pavement dwellers of Kolkata: A geographical appraisal. *Researchers World* 9(1): 36–49.

Rusenko RM (2020) Homelessness regulation and neoliberalism's imperial past: The Janus face of anti-homeless urbanism and Tokyo's modern socio-spatial development. *Antipode* 52(6): 1815–1836.

Smith N (2002) New globalism, new urbanism: Gentrification as global urban strategy. *Antipode* 34(3): 427–450.

Speer J (2016) The right to infrastructure: A struggle for sanitation in Fresno, California homeless encampments. *Urban Geography* 37(7): 1049–1069.

Speer J (2018) The rise of the tent ward: Homeless camps in the era of mass incarceration. *Political Geography* 62: 160–169.

Zufferey C and Chung D (2015) 'Red dust homelessness': Housing, home and homelessness in remote Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies* 41: 13–22.