

Precarious Enterprise on the Margins

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Work, Poverty, and Homelessness in the City

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PREFACE

This book is the product of a convergence of desires. At one level, it represents my ongoing commitment to engage in research that addresses the deep abiding inequalities that pattern our social world. It therefore marks a continuation of my interest in understanding power, culture and identity and the intersections of education and work. It also represents my desire to better understand the multifaceted everyday experiences of poverty: experiences that cannot, as I reflect in Chaps. 1 and 2, be simplistically rendered as ‘excluded’, or worse still, as ‘in lack’, ‘depraved’ or ‘out of joint’. The everyday contours of poverty are not expressions of deficiency or laziness in an otherwise functional capitalism. They are expressions of the dysfunctionality of contemporary capitalism, of the social relations of inequality and injustice, felt and lived in diverse ways. There is a need therefore to resist simplistic explanations, categorisations and labels. We know well that the dynamic powerful practices of class, gender, sexuality and race spill over, intersect, and frame social experience in multifarious, and sometimes unexpected, ways. With this impetus in mind, my hope is that this book contributes meaningfully to the ongoing academic and public discussions on how to create politically engaged research attuned to the constantly changing—but nevertheless deeply embedded—structures of social injustice.

At the same time, at least in part, this is a book also born out of frustration. The idea for this book emerged whilst I was in the midst of completing a different research project for my doctoral thesis at the University of Cambridge, UK 2007–2011. Here, whilst living and studying in one of the most elite educational institutions in the world, I was troubled

by the homelessness and poverty on the streets of Cambridge. My own feelings about studying at Cambridge were mixed. On the one hand, having worked previously as a school teacher and having never aspired to an ‘Ivy League’ education, I could never shake the sensation of being an (incredibly beholden) fish out of water. This provided ample fuel to feed ambiguous feelings of gratitude and an urgency to work hard. Yet, on the other hand, these feelings were countered by a political awareness of—and frustration over—the past and present inequalities that puncture the hallowed halls of an elitist institution such as Cambridge. This privilege appeared to jump out and grab me, keeping a firm hold as I inevitably compared the stark differences in the educational ethos and history of Cambridge and the subject of my doctoral research: the history of radical working-class and Black educational movements (see Gerrard 2014).

Perhaps this political frustration was heightened for me as an Anglo Australian studying in England, aware of the colonial roots and ties stained with Empire my home country has with England. I could not help but feel the paradoxical tentative embrace of the central educational arteries of mother Empire. Educational institutions and intellectual traditions are of course central to nation and Empire building. As an Australian studying in England I was travelling a well traversed and worn down path with roots in colonisation. Long-held traditions of pilgrimages from Empire’s outposts to its heartland educational institutions have brought many from the ‘South’ in search of social mobility (or affirmation), and (for some) an authoritative nod of recognition from Empire’s heartland institutions (see also Connell 2007). These journeys are also centrally implicated in the histories of resistance and critique from ‘the colonies’ (see Schwartz 2003). More recently, student activism surrounding racist colonial links to colleges and university scholarships, have sharpened analyses of the relationship between institutions like Cambridge and Oxford University and Empire (see Newsinger 2016).

Nevertheless, the symbolic and material importance of this authoritative nod of recognition cannot be understated. Many challenges to university elitism have demanded expansion and augmentation of the nod: from the push for women to be fully included into the University (finally realised in 1988 when the last all-male college, Magdalene College, opened its doors to women, infamously marked on the day by some male students wearing Black arm bands in protest [see Dyhouse 2006]), to the complex biographies of migration and diaspora that underlie the history of colonisation and education. Yet, at the same time, such journeying is deeply imbricated

in the social processes of global mobility that have ultimately strengthened and deepened the grooves of class, race and gendered distinctions (see Mirza 2015). Despite various policies and programmes, Cambridge remains an elite, largely white, institution (see e.g. Vasagar 2010).

Moreover, just a very gentle scratch of the surface of Cambridge reveals the wealth of labour that creates the ‘student experience’: the cleaners who clean students’ college rooms and houses, the servers who deliver four-course meals to students in grand eating halls, the cooks who prepare these meals, and the countless other workers who were having a very different ‘Cambridge experience’ to that of students and academic staff. Cambridge is also a city with notable poverty and homelessness, and it is here that the seeds of this book began. The homeless sellers of the homeless street press, *The Big Issue*, particularly brought this poverty and homelessness to the fore on the streets of Cambridge city. Positioned on bustling street corners and filling the air with their sales pitches, sellers appeared to interrupt business-as-usual university life. In a city known for its manicured lawns, imposing college buildings and quaint cobbled stone streets this poverty and homelessness could be interpreted as ‘out of joint’, visually, culturally and materially.

It is this seeming contradiction in elitism and poverty that first sparked the idea for the research for this book. Yet, it is a contradiction that is far from being ‘out of joint’; it is intimately intertwined with the ways in which inequalities are created under capitalism. As this book illustrates, homeless street presses such as *The Big Issue* in Melbourne and London and *Street Sheet* in San Francisco are important contemporary examples of informal economies and work. At a time with stubborn chronic and long-term unemployment, dramatic shifts in work conditions and availability, and growing under-employment, these sorts of work practices have growing significance. To state it plainly, for many women and men this is the only form of work available. As a work practice reliant on the enterprising spirit and motivation of the sellers, homeless street press work also highlights the messy interconnections of contemporary labouring and learning. Sellers must cultivate the right skills and dispositions in order to attract sales and generate income, in precarious conditions.

And so, a doctoral thesis completed and another research project on, I finally embarked on the research for this book through a McKenzie Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the University of Melbourne, 2012–2015. Over three years, I spent many hours passing time and talking with sellers of homeless street press predominantly in Melbourne (*The Big Issue*), but also in San Francisco (*Street Sheet*) and London (*The Big Issue*)

as my research took me to the places in which homeless street press first began and was made popular. In addition, a significant proportion of my preparation for this book was following the archive traces of these homeless street presses internationally. As I document in Chap. 3, homeless street press are connected to a long history of homeless self-help and activism in the US (such as in the *Street Sheet*), which was then taken up and re-born as a ‘social enterprise’ (a business with a social purpose) through *The Big Issue* first in London and then in Melbourne, and now in multiple cities internationally. In this book, rather than document and describe the experience of homeless street press sellers as extraordinary to life under capitalism, I set out to place the politics of the working and learning lives of sellers in the context of wider social relations of inequality and injustice.

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